THE

WIFE'S SECRET.

BY

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AUTHOR OF "THE REJECTED WIFE," "FASHION AND FAMINE," "THE OLD HOMESTEAD," "MARY DERWENT," "THE HEIRESS," "THE GULF BETWEEN THEM," ETC., ETC.

If fame is won by woman, she must yield
  The richest glory of her being up,
Drain her full heart, fling off its golden shield,
  And give her holiest love to fill the cup,
Which, like a brimming goblet, rich with wine,
She poureth out upon the world's broad shrine.
In after years, such thoughts as live and burn,
Are sacred ashes in her funeral urn.

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DEDICATION.

TO

JOHN NEAL, OF PORTLAND, MAINE,

ONE OF THE MOST

VALUED FRIENDS THAT I EVER HAD,

OR EXPECT TO HAVE,

THIS

VOLUME IS GRATEFULLY DEDICATED.

ANN S. STEPHENS.

Washington City, Feb. 29th, 1864.

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THE WIFE'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

UP THE RIVER.

A STEAMER was making its way very quietly up the Hudson. She was a small affair, mostly devoted to freight, and ran to one of those river towns which are of little note in themselves, but form an outlet for the products of many a rich hill-side and valley lying back of that noble stream.

It made a pretty object on the river, because the season was autumn, when every thing that lives and moves through the hazy atmosphere takes some form of beauty. It was soon after the first frosts; the forests were heavy with a sumptuous richness of leaves, and their gorgeous tints were reflected in the water, till the currents that were in shadow seemed running with liquid jewels.

So the steamer moved on with the breath of that soft Indian summer sighing across its deck, so quietly, that the shadows through which it passed deepened without being broken, and the sunshine laughed around it as it does when the water-birds are frolicking, turning the foam to pearls and the spray to diamonds.

Two persons sat upon the deck—a man of fifty, wrapped in a travelling-cloak of foreign make, and a young girl of seventeen, also muffled in a cloth mantle lined with fur, in which she shivered as you see a poor Italian grayhound under all its pretty housings when winter begins to threaten us with cold.

Yet the girl was tall and fair, with that charming type of loveliness which makes an American woman a model all over the world—so delicate, so bright, and, alas! so evanescent is her beauty. Her air was foreign. The wonder with which she gazed abroad upon the hills, clothed in their autumnal foliage, bespoke her a stranger to the land; but her gray eyes, the abundance of rich auburn hair that fell in waves from under her hood of blue silk, and the energy of mind that spoke in every sweet feature was truly American, as the gorgeous foliage upon the hill-sides.

But there she sat upon the deck shivering in her furs, though the wind came laden with the breath of dying fern-leaves, and to one accustomed to our climate would have seemed balmy and fragrant rather than cold.

"Papa, do you hear me?"

The gentleman started and looked around with a nervous sort of terror in his eyes. Her voice had drawn his thoughts back from the long-ago with a pang, but he answered gently and smiling—

"Well, Gillian?"

The girl had spoken in Italian, and her voice rendered even that sweet language more melodious by its rich tones. Her father answered in English, and in that tongue she spoke the second time—

"Father, why have we come to this country? Is it to live here forever?"

"It is your native land, Gillian. Look abroad and tell me if Italy is more beautiful?"

"It is strange, gorgeous, oppressively gorgeous, father; but those grand old trees drink up all the warmth. I am chilled and lonely here."

"It is my fault, Gillian. A daughter of America should not be chilled by a wind like this. I have done wrong to keep you away from home till you have forgotten your native land."

"Not quite, papa. I remember it a little: the spot which I recollect is not like these hills, but a broken country, scattered with houses, with one at the foot of a rugged hill, which seemed to be my home. I only recollect it at one time, and in one way. The door was open; a glow of sunset fell upon the sill, crossing softly along the room in which I sat playing. I remember the very dress I wore. It had a pink tint, and was protected by a little white apron, rounded at the corners and frilled all round; in that apron I held some flowers, a handful of green apples, and a doll's tea-set, huddled together."

The girl paused, smiling: then she suddenly added, with a half-forced laugh, for there was something in her father's eyes that made her hesitate—

"These are trivial things to remember so long, but somehow they will always come up, clear as a picture, when I think of this land. I could almost promise to recognize the very pattern of my dress on the moment, if it were before me; as for the toys, nothing has ever seemed so pretty to me since."

"And is this all? Have you no remembrance of the house or its inmates?" asked the father, in a low voice.

"Of the house? Oh, yes! it was of stone; rough,

heavy stone, with wings and a porch, over which some vine crept, and sent its masses down like a curtain. In front was a great tree, maple I should think——"

"No, walnut!"

"Oh, walnut, was it? Very well, I know that it seemed a tall tree, through which the sunset shimmered like gold. Beyond that, on the right, sloping down a hill, lay an orchard, from which I had stolen the green apples in my apron."

"And this is all?"

"How can you think so, father? Would that make a complete picture? No! no! In the centre of the room stood a lady—a tall, beautiful lady—combing her hair I think, papa, but am not quite certain, that I had torn away her comb while she was striving to take the green apples from my apron; for I have a feeling that she was angry with me, and that I had conquered in something. Was I a very wilful, naughty child, papa?"

"I am afraid you were not the only wilful one in those days, Gillian," said the father, sadly. "But go on; this is a new revelation to me; why, child, you were but little more than two years old then. But the—the lady?"

"She stood before the looking-glass, holding her hair up with one hand. It was bright and heavy, sweeping down over her arm in waves; the color—yes! father—the color was like mine; and I never thought of it till now. But the lady herself was tall and, and—indeed she was so like myself, when I dress my hair before the glass, that it must have been all a dream. Only, papa, did I ever wear a dress like that pink calico, with a white vine running over it? And, if you ever knew such a lady, did she wear a dress of very dark crimson, sprinkled with tiny leaves of a brighter red?"

"Yes! Gillian, yes! She wore a dress like that—an India silk, rare in those days."

"And the lady herself? Was she a real, human being? Did I ever know her? Could this picture be in reality my old home?"

"You will know in a little time, Gillian."

"And the lady—shall I see her?"

A cloud came over Mr. Bentley's face, and he turned away without answering. But his daughter was not one to be put readily from any purpose. She drew close to his side, and resting one hand on his arm, bent lovingly toward him.

"Was this lady my mother?" she said, almost in a whisper.

He answered, in the same low voice, "Yes! Gillian. The lady was your mother."

He raised the hand which still lay upon his knee in saying this, wrung it with a violence she had never witnessed before, and, arising suddenly, went down to the little cabin, waving her back as she attempted to follow.

Gillian looked after him, surprised and almost terrified. What had she said or done, to arouse so much emotion? Was it wrong for a child to inquire regarding the mother, who had died almost before her remembrance? These thoughts disturbed her greatly, and, joined to the loneliness around, left her sad.

After a little, Mr. Bentley returned and resumed the conversation of his own accord.

"We are going," he said, "to the house which rests so marvellously in your memory, Gillian. It is now inhabited by your mother's brother—a plain, simple farmer, who has held possession ever since I went abroad."

"My mother's brother, papa? Her own brother, and

my uncle? I never knew before that we had relatives in this country. What is he like? Is he married? Has he any children—daughters? Indeed I hope so. How strange it will seem to have relatives!"

Mr. Bentley smiled gravely at this ardent outburst, and answered her questions one after another.

"Your uncle Hart, I have just said, is an honest, hardy, frank farmer, who has earned his own bread with toil and energy all his life. He has been married, and is a widower, with one child, who keeps the house. This is all I can tell you before you have an opportunity of judging for yourself."

"And will that be soon, papa? I am getting very tired of this little craft. It seemed pretty enough at a distance, but really it is not particularly comfortable."

"Well, have a little patience, and your pilgrimage is ended. You see where the hills overtop each other at our left. No, not there, but farther up stream. Well, between those hills is a valley, through which a road passes into the country. There our water-travel ends, and to-night we shall sleep in the old homestead."

"How mournfully you speak, papa! This visit home seems to give you no pleasure! And yet you were so determined on it!"

"I am far beyond the age of ardent feelings, Gillian. Few things excite me to pleasure, now."

"But pain! Oh, papa, if age takes away all capacities for pleasure, and leaves the powers of pain untouched, I pray God to take me early from the earth," cried the young girl, with tears in her eyes; and taking her father's hand, she kissed it tenderly.

Mr. Bentley drew his hand away, not angrily, but as one who shrinks from any unusual display of sentiment.

His action was not that of a cold man, but of one who shielded deep feelings from a sudden assault.

"I did not say this, Gillian. All seasons of life have their blessings, if we only learn to use them. But see how quietly we are drawing towards the hills. In a little time we shall be on shore."

Gillian started up and went into the cabin, a little excited and eager to leave the vessel. New scenes were before her, and at her age novelty had a vivid charm, come in what form it might.

CHAPTER II.

A COUNTRY RIDE.

An hour after Gillian disappeared from the deck, the steamer put in to her port, a little cove breaking up between the mountains, that had seemed to overtop each other at a distance, but which now revealed a narrow valley opening back into the country, with the germ of a village lying at its mouth and crowding close down to the water.

A wharf, barricaded with piles of split wood ready for shipment, received the steamer, which took the inhabitants by surprise, and created no little excitement among the wood-cutters, who hung around a grocery-store on the wharf. The arrival of a steamer was something, but the two persons, who stood upon the deck, were so unlike the passengers usually brought to the little harbor, that they excited a general and lively curiosity.

Before Mr. Bentley and his daughter could reach the

wharf, half a dozen men had boarded the steamer, while a group of children, who had been shying oyster-shells into the river and fishing with pin-hooks from the timbers, crowded close, with open mouths and looks of common wonder.

Mr. Bentley inquired of a man, who approached him first, if any conveyance could be obtained at the village for the interior; but the man, true to his Yankee origin, answered by another question:

"Was the gentleman straight from New York?"

Mr. Bentley smiled; for the first time he felt completely at home. This peculiarity of his countrymen went to his heart like a welcome.

"Yes! he was directly from New York."

"Come from further along, though, I reckon?" rejoined the countryman.

"Yes!"

"East, mebby?—this town settled by down-easters."

"No! from Italy."

"Whar?" cried the man, in open-mouthed perplexity. "Whar?"

"Beyond seas," answered Mr. Bentley, with great good humor; for the man's curiosity awoke a thousand kindly feelings.

"Beyond seas? Oh, yes! Travel all the way by land or water, if I ain't too bold?"

Gillian's face sparkled. The conversation delighted her.

"By water all the way," answered Mr. Bentley, reproving her with a glance, and turning to the man again.

"Now pray inform me if there is any chance of obtaining a conveyance, which will take myself and daughter some twenty miles into the country?"

"Your daughter, ha? It kinder struck me that the gal

must be something to you. Harnsome as a pictur; ain't she, though?"

Gillian laughed outright, and the countryman drowned her voice in an answering laugh.

"Knew it the minit I sot eyes on you a standing together," he said, addressing her directly. "'Spose you calculate to ketch a beau in these parts? Well, there ain't the least mite of danger but you'll do it, right off the reel. Now, how old might you be?"

Gillian was half frightened out of her merriment by his ardent curiosity. But she answered that he had not yet replied to her father about the "carriage."

"Carriage?" answered the man, sinking both hands into his pockets and ejaculating his surprise in a broken whistle. "Why, I reckon the only carriage you'll be likely to get in these parts 'll be a Pennsylvania wagon, with two chairs sot in behind, and a board laid across for the driver: that's the kind of carriages our gals ride in."

"Well, papa, I suppose that will do," cried Gillian, delighted with the idea of a ride in the open air, and still more delighted with the promise of this novel conveyance.

But the countryman was not to be so easily put off.

"Any more family?" he inquired, turning to Mr. Bentley.

"I will tell you that, and give a silver dollar in to the bargain, if you bring me a respectable conveyance to the wharf, in just twenty minutes," said Bentley, looking at his watch.

"But how much 'll you agree to give for the team, with a good-looking driver that your gal won't be ashamed to ride behind—throwing in horse-feed and a bite on the way?"

Mr. Bentley named a sum so liberal that the man

forgot even curiosity in his haste to secure it. In less time than that appointed, he came dashing down to the wharf in a stout wagon, which contained one comfortable seat, and a piece of rough board answering for the driver's accommodation. A pair of beautiful iron-gray horses, that might have befitted a queen's carriage, gave promise of a quick if not comfortable journey.

Into the wagon the luggage which had been brought from the steamer was placed, and in a fit of extra politeness the countryman threw a buffalo robe over the seat, forming a rather imposing affair, of which Mr. Bentley and his daughter took possession. Then he gave a shout, and a young man came forth from a neighboring store, ready to act as jehu for his father.

Away they drove over the hills, and along the beautiful lakes, that render the basin of Rockland county scarcely less than a wild paradise. Every thing was strange and new to Gillian. The forest trees, grouped in masses of red, yellow, maroon, green, and brown, all relieving and brightening each other; the broken hollows choked up with hemlocks and pines; the ferns and mosses creeping down to the wayside! each sending out some new fragrance soothed while it invigorated and filled her with delight.

As they approached the western hills that bounded the county, Mr. Bentley grew silent and anxious—so silent and pale that Gillian ceased to talk, and grew lonely. The driver, who had amused her with his blunt questions and shrewd remarks, now began to be a little curious about their destination. Hitherto Mr. Bentley had told him what road to take, and where to turn. But now the sun was on the verge of the horizon; the western outline was one glow of gold; and the gorgeous trees swayed to

and fro in its light, blending sky and earth together in rich harmony.

"Well, now, I suppose there would be no harm in asking where we are driving to?" inquired the man, leaning back, with one hand on his seat, and checking his horses with the other.

Mr. Bentley, whose eyes had been fixed on one point, with a strained gaze, directed the man's attention to a distant dwelling, which stood upon the slope of the hills, and answered in a husky voice,

"To that house."

There was something in his voice that impressed the man, who merely answered, "just so," and prepared to drive on. But one of the horses had got a pebble in the hollow of his hoof, and he was obliged to dismount from his seat and remedy the accident. As he stood in the road, with the horse's foot bent back between his knees, striving to beat the pebble out with a stone, a hearty voice came out of a side road, and directly a man appeared, riding on a heavy farm-horse, and mounted on two plethoric flour-bags, which were flung across the saddle.

"Hello, there! What's the difficulty? Lamed your hoss or broke a linch-pin?"

"Nothing to speak of," answered the driver. "One of the horses has got a stone in his hoof, and limps a trifle. I'm obliged to you all the same."

The farmer rode up to the wagon, looked down at the horse, who held his hoof daintily, with the edge to the ground, and then took a friendly survey of the travellers.

"Strangers, I reckon?" he muttered. Then turning to the driver he commenced an acquaintance in the usual way.

"Any news stirrin' from where you come from, neighbor?"

"Nothing to speak of."

"Just from the river?"

"Started from that point to-day."

"Crops good in that vicinity?"

"From fair to middling."

All this time the farmer kept his eyes on Mr. Bentley, who fixed uneasy glances on his face while he was speaking, but turned away, perplexed and uncertain in the end.

As the driver mounted to his seat again, the farmer prepared to ride on, but with evident hesitation, for he laid the bridle down on his horse's neck twice, as if about to address the travellers, but took it up again and urged his horse into a slow jog.

Now Mr. Bentley seemed to shake off his uncertainty. He bent forward in nervous haste, and bade the driver call that man back. The sound of a voice made the farmer turn, and he came trotting up to the wagon, evidently glad to be recalled.

"Tell me," said Bentley, leaning toward him, "is your name Hart? And do you live in the stone house on the slope of the hill yonder?"

"My name is Hart, sir; and that stone house is my home, till the owner claims it," answered the farmer, promptly.

"Daniel," said Mr. Bentley, reaching forth his hand, "have you entirely forgotten me?"

The farmer took the slender hand in his hard palm, grasped it, and was silent for a moment. But his broad features worked, and at last his eyes filled, and, while shaking Mr. Bentley's hand, he turned his head aside, ashamed of his weakness.

It is strange how little people have to say, who meet for the first time, after years of separation! The first words that passed between these two persons, after a mutual recognition, were simple enough:

"This is my daughter," said Bentley.

"Not now. I'd rather look at her in—in the old house," almost sobbed the farmer, keeping his head turned away. "I've got a gal too; not like what she was; but a likely critter enough. I'll ride forard, if you'd just as lief, and tell her you're a-comin'!"

With this the farmer beat his heels against the sides of his horse, and dashed off, ashamed of the emotion that had heaved his broad chest with a tempest of old recollections.

Gillian looked after him, her lips parted and her eyes dilating with wonder. To her there was something ludicrous in the heavy trot which kept the farmer in constant motion on his meal-bags, and she broke into a laugh when the horse dashed into a skeltering gallop, that threatened to dislodge the whole load at every awkward leap. Little did she know of the genuine feeling which went with that jumbling picture.

Mr. Bentley turned upon her with an angry flash of the eyes, and said, sternly,

"Gillian Bentley, that man is your mother's only brother, her benefactor. Laugh now, if you have the heart."

Gillian's mirth broke into a sob. Never in her life had she been addressed so harshly before. The surprise took away her breath.

"Oh, father!"

"Her brother, girl. A man whom I hold in reverence above all others on the earth."

"Father, forgive me!"

Gillian was trembling from head to foot. She could have beaten herself for that wanton laugh. Mr. Bentley drew her to his side, and strove to smile upon her. But it was not easy, even for this forgiving caress, to reconcile the sensitive girl to herself.

Meantime the driver had started his horses, unconscious of the little domestic drama going on behind his back; and every moment drew the travellers nearer home.

CHAPTER III.

AUNT HETTY.

When Daniel Hart rode up in front of his house, Martha stood in the door, waiting his approach with some impatience. It was baking-day, her flour had given out, the great oven in the back kitchen had burned down, and was getting cold; in short the family baking for that whole week was in danger for want of a measure of flour to mould the bread with, and that lay in the bags swung across her father's saddle. So out she ran at once, with her sleeves tucked up, her plump, white arms ready for instant work, and a tin basin in her hand.

"Come, father, jump down and untie the bags; I am in a desperate hurry. Another ten minutes and we should have had to heat over again. I've got the most splendid pan of beans, all ready for baking, with such a lump of pork on the top, all cut in checkers, and dropping open like a rose. Come, hurry up, do!"

Daniel Hart got down from his horse, and swung one of the bags over his shoulder, and marched into the porch. Somehow he did not feel able to speak on commonplace things, but untied the bag in silence, watching Martha as she took out the flour in handfuls and filled her basin.

"Martha," he said, at last, "is Aunt Hetty in the kitchen?"

The girl lifted her rosy face, with a look of surprise. There was something unusual in the father's voice.

"Aunt Hetty? Yes, father. Where else should she be? I left her raking up the coals with a long shovel."

"Martha, wait a moment. There'll be company here in a little while. I met your uncle, Joseph Bentley, and his darter on the cross-roads; and they'll be here in a few minutes, without fail."

"Uncle Joseph Bentley and his daughter from foreign parts!" cried Martha, all in a flutter of excitement. "Goodness me, what shall we get for supper? The baking won't be out of the oven this two hours. Oh, father, do go kill a chicken, and I'll put down a short-cake—that, with preserves and honey, will have to answer."

Away Martha ran, bearing the flour between her plump little hands, while her apron streamed behind her, and the bright curls danced and twinkled around her face.

"Aunt Hetty! I say, Aunt Hetty, what do you think? Uncle Joseph Bentley and Cousin Gillian—what a name—are coming here to-day. You can hear the wagon tugging up the hill. Hetty! Hetty! where have you hid? Aunt Hetty!"

"I am here," answered a faint, struggling voice, from the back porch; and Mehitable Hart came in, white and still as usual. But a less excited person would have remarked that her face, always colorless, was now almost

ghostly, and that her small hands shook like leaves when she attempted to take the basin from her niece.

"Don't take it all. Leave me enough for a short-cake. No! that's not it. Leave enough out for that, and I'll mould the bread. You look tired out. Here's the butter, and there lies the rolling-pin. Goodness gracious! how fast they come! You can fairly hear the wheels clatter. But there's a good deal of work in ten minutes: so now for it!"

Suiting the action to the words, Martha dusted the table with flour, plunged her arms into the kneading-tray, cut off a mass of dough, and went to work with wonderful vigor, rolling, pinching, and smoothing the shapeless substance into as dainty a loaf as ever dexterous hands moulded.

"There!" she exclaimed, smiling, as she laid the first white globe in its pan, "if they want a handsomer loaf than that, let them knead it, I say. Dear me, Aunt Hetty, how your hands shake! Do call old Dinah to roll out the cake, and go fix up a little. Put on a black silk apron and a nice cap: that'll make a lady of you in no time!"

"Yes!" answered Aunt Hetty, in a low, hoarse voice, wringing her hands together with passionate violence, rather than from an effort to divest themselves of the clinging flour, "yes! niece, I am almost tired out;" and with these words trembling on her lips, the little woman opened a door and glided up a flight of back stairs to her own room.

When once there, she flung up the sash, looked wildly down the road; then creeping back to a far corner of the room, sat down, moaning softly, like a wounded kid.

At each new rattle of the wheels, she gave a start, and looked piteously around, as if seeking some covert; and

when Martha came in, dusting her hands, all rosy and smiling with excitement, the little woman darted to her bureau, and began a vague search after something, while a timid apology for not being ready trembled unuttered on her white lips.

"Here, aunt! what on earth possesses you? That's my bureau, and here's your cap. Let me put it on for you. Why, how you shiver, and this poor little face is as white as curd. Wait a minute: this'll never do. Let me hunt up the pink bows, and pin them on: with all this white you look like a ghost!"

Aunt Hetty sat down, both hands dropping helplessly to her lap, while she resigned herself to the busy fingers of her niece, with a frightened look, growing paler and paler, spite of the pink ribbons, as the wagon drew near the house.

"Here," said Martha, taking the old lady's face between her hands, and kissing her cold lips, "you are neat as a new pin: only do cheer up a little! What always frightens you so when company comes? Now I'll fix up a trifle myself, and go down. Where on earth is my brown dress? Dear me, this hook never will fasten!"

Uttering these broken ejaculations, Martha Hart arrayed her pretty figure in a dress of dark merino, put on a neat muslin collar with cuffs to match, and hurried down to receive the coming guests. She had so long been the leading spirit of the household, that it seemed the most natural thing in the world for her to go out on the front porch, where the flour bags still lay in a heap, and wait for the visitors to descend from their homely conveyance; for, though a mere girl, in all essentials she was far more mistress of the house than Aunt Hetty, its nominal head.

Still, with all her brightness and sweet ways, as her

father called them, Martha was a little shy, and really modest. The presence of strangers made her cheeks glow like a peach, while her large, brown eyes cast timid glances from under the long fringes that would have provoked admiration from an artist, and which sent John Downs's heart into his mouth the moment he sat his eyes on her.

Daniel Hart went out to the wagon as it drew up, and, before Mr. Bentley could dismount, took Gillian in his arms, holding her close to his bosom, while he looked in her face.

Gillian was surprised to feel his great heart swell against her side, and to see his massive features quivering like those of an infant. When he set her upon the ground his eyes were full of tears—so full that he could not see his daughter through the mist. She drew close to her father, whispering softly,

"Did he love my mother very much, papa?"

But Mr. Bentley did not answer. His feelings were not so warmly impulsive as those he witnessed: contact with society had driven them deeper into his nature. While the farmer's heart heaved, his only stood still.

"And this," he said, approaching Martha, "is my niece, no doubt. Gillian, she should be about your own age."

The two girls looked at each other shyly at first, but after a moment Gillian ran up the steps with a bright smile on her face, and one hand extended, for she saw, by the blushes that came and went on Martha's face, a thousand unspoken welcomes that went to her heart at once.

"So you are my cousin; I am very glad!" she exclaimed. "Why, it seems like home already!"

"This is your home," said Daniel Hart, coming up the steps, with a spirit of self-abnegation breaking from every feature. "The house, the land, from the hill top to the

turnpike, is all your father's: as for us, we do not own a foot."

"Indeed! well, that's of no sort of consequence, I fancy!" cried Gillian, looking around: "oh! there is the orchard, and here is the great walnut. I remember it all —all but the—the——"

Gillian broke off suddenly, shocked by her own thoughtlessness. She saw at once that it was the memory of her mother which had made her father so pale, and filled that strong man's eyes with tears.

"It is a beautiful view," she added, softly; "some day, my cousin, we will go all over it. Dear me! who is that?"

The two girls had walked into the hall as Gillian was speaking, and stood in the door of the family sitting-room. Opposite them was a long, old-fashioned mantle-glass, and in it Gillian saw the figure of a little woman shrinking away behind the window drapery, so pale and terrified that it made her start and open her eyes with wonder.

"Oh! it is only Aunt Hetty; you are sure to like Aunt Hetty; come in and speak to her!" cried Martha, cheerfully; "she's a little backward with company, but the dearest, nicest—oh! indeed——"

Martha broke off with a little start, for that instant Aunt Hetty came forward, with a swift, noiseless movement, and stood close to Gillian, gazing in her face, with a scared, earnest look.

"Sister! oh, sister!"

The words dropped rapidly from her lips, and she caught hold of Gillian's dress, with a tender, pleading motion that perplexed the young girl exceedingly.

"Why, aunt, what is the matter? You haven't got a sister in the wide world that I know of. This is our lady

cousin from foreign parts. I told you all about it upstairs," said Martha.

"I know—I know!" said Aunt Hetty, lifting one little hand to her forehead. "It is Sarah's child, not—not herself. I know that, but cannot realize it. Let me look at myself."

She went up to the mantle-glass, and peered at the pale face that met her for more than a minute. When she turned away, the most wan smile that Gillian ever saw gleamed on her lips.

"Can you believe it?" she said, mournfully, pointing to Martha. "I was like her then!"

"Why, aunt, how strangely you talk!" said Martha, bewildered by this singular address.

"Do I?" murmured the old lady. "Do I? What was it all about?" She seemed tempted to address Gillian again, in the same vague way, but with one of her warm-hearted impulses the young girl threw her arms around the little woman and kissed her two or three times. "So you were my mother's sister. I understand it now—and I look so much like her; of course that must be it. No wonder it disturbs you, aunt. Dear! how strange it seems to call any one aunt. Won't you kiss me, dear lady?"

The old lady began to tremble under the caresses which the bright girl lavished on her, and Gillian remembered, after, that she did not return her kiss, but rather struggled in her embrace than responded to it.

"Oh, that's right," the farmer called out, entering the hall. "That's right, Mehitable: welcome the gal with a whole heart: she must not feel strange among us."

"I could not feel strange here, Uncle Daniel," cried Gillian, smiling brightly while the tears leaped to her eyes.

"See how I have got all the names! I, who never had a relative before. Uncle, aunt, cousin! Isn't it delightful?"

"That's kind and hearty," replied the farmer. "Take our cousin up-stairs, Martha, while this young chap and I bring in the trunks. Aunt Hetty will see about supper while you get acquainted."

The two girls went up-stairs, but directly Martha came down again to hurry the trunks. John Downs had one on his shoulder, mounting the stairs. Martha stepped aside to let him pass, and then she observed, with a blush, what remarkably fine eyes the young fellow had. Amid all her excitement this thought would come back to her mind all the evening; for, according to the custom of those times, the driver sat down at the same table with his passengers, and Martha was placed directly opposite him during supper.

I don't pretend to know how it happened, but when Martha Hart went to bed that night she had learned that John Downs owned two-thirds of a sloop on the river, beside the iron-gray horses, the Pennsylvania wagon, and some bank-stock in New York—that his father had been one of the first settlers in the river town where he made his home; and altogether she gathered a very satisfactory account of his antecedents, though she certainly had no sort of business with the information; but then Martha came naturally to her curiosity, for all that part of the country had been settled from New England.

CHAPTER IV.

MIDNIGHT IN THE STONE MANSION.

THAT night, when all the family were in bed and the hush of repose lay on every thing, Mr. Bentley and Daniel Hart sat together over the brands of a hickory-wood fire that had burned low on the sitting-room hearth.

There was a strong contrast between the two men, both in character and in person—not the contrast of good and evil qualities, but of intellectual organization. One was delicate, sensitive, and reflective by nature; all these qualities had been sharpened and refined by an education which few Americans could boast. The other was grand in his honesty, brave as a lion in every sense of the word, large-hearted and of vigorous mind, well informed, and yet almost entirely without absolute education. He was progressive in thought, but pronounced his words exactly as his father had done before him; but his opinion had power in the neighborhood, even among educated men; and he was one of those persons of whom it is said, "He is a whole-souled man, whose word is as good as his bond."

Such men may become what the world call "well off," but they seldom get rich—seldom care for more than an easy competency, which they enjoy with zest, because earned by labor.

Such was Daniel Hart, as he sat in his oaken easy-chair by the fire-side that night. His stout form filled it comfortably without crowding, and his great, hard hand rested

on the arm as he leaned towards his brother-in-law. His air was earnest, and something of curiosity was expressed in his features, but they were frank and open as the day. You knew at a glance that whatever he felt would be spoken out honestly.

On the other hand, Mr. Bentley sat in his chair, tall, well-proportioned, without leaning to excess in any way; quiet and watchful. High-toned refinement, an excess of cultivation, and those resources that spring from it, were written in his features. He did not seem less truthful than the farmer: what you saw was sincere and honorable; but there existed depths of feeling and hidden thoughts in that man's nature, impenetrable to his best friend. His soul was like the waters of Niagara, just below the Falls—deep and turbulent underneath, but tranquil on the surface. You knew that storms were in those depths, but could neither see nor hear them.

But the farmer's nature was like the waters of Lake Superior, clear and transparent. There was not a thought of his being that did not shine through like the pebbles and sand of that pure lake.

"Tell me," said the strong man, with a quiver of the voice, while he looked upon the waning fire as through a mist, the tears lay so close to his eyes; "tell me, brother-in-law, how it was that my sister died in those foreign parts. We never had the particulars: only read in the papers that she was gone. You wrote to us, I don't doubt, but the letter never came, and to this day Hetty and I are uncertain how it all happened."

"And you have never heard?" said the other, in a low voice, leaning back in his chair, and shrouding his eyes with one hand.

"Not a word since you left here, nearly fifteen years

ago, except what reached us from a New York paper. There we found that poor Sarah had died, and that was all."

"And you made no further inquiries?"

"How could I? Who was there for us to ask about her? I went down to New York to inquire, for Hetty was almost distracted for a good while, and I was afraid she would pine herself to death; but there was no one to tell me any thing. It seemed as if Sarah and her child had drifted from our home and been lost in the fog—she went so far out of our reach before she died."

"And you grieved over her loss?"

"Grieved over her loss! Who could help it? Wasn't she the salt of the earth, our Sarah? Wasn't she like an angel of light on her father's hearth, before you took her away?"

Mr. Bentley pressed his hand close to his eyes and groaned within himself.

"I don't think much of good looks, and I ain't sure that Sarah was what folks call a beautiful woman; but I tell you, sir, there was something about her face when she talked, and in her eyes when she smiled, that no woman's face ever had for me before or since. That look would bring me to her feet like a dog, no matter how much I was sot again what she wanted." The stout man paused in his speech and swept one hand across his face. Then he spoke again with more calmness:

"Mr. Bentley, when you took that gal from under my father's roof, the light seemed to go out of the old house with her, and it never came back again. Hetty, you know, was always nervous and afraid of her own shadow, still she kept up wonderfully while Sarah was with her; but when she went away, the poor little thing wilted right

down, and she never has seemed to cheer up since. You wouldn't a known our Hetty, I dare say; she's sort of withered into nothing since that news came. If young Mike Hurst did not come to see her now and then, she wouldn't know there was a world outside of the house. She's dreadful melancholy; the only time I ever heard her talk up pert was when he was here last summer's a year."

"And who is Mike Hurst?" inquired Bentley, dropping his hand, while a gloom came to his eyes.

"Well, I don't rightly know, myself, but I believe he's an orphan boy that our gals picked up in New York afore Sarah was married. I don't right like the fellow, but Hetty won't hear a word agin him from anybody. You can't wake her up on any thing but that. But this isn't what I sot up to talk about. Tell me while we're alone, how my sister died."

"I cannot tell you. I cannot talk of her. It wrings my heart too bitterly," answered Bentley, and without another word he left the room.

CHAPTER V.

GILLIAN AND HER UNCLE.

When Daniel Hart was left alone, he sat for a moment troubled by the outburst of passionate feeling with which Bentley had left the room.

Daniel Hart thought over the old times till the great, brave heart in his bosom swelled heavily, and he arose from

his chair, pacing up and down the room with his hands locked behind him, and the balls of his two thumbs pressed against each other, as was his habit when drawn into deep or disagreeable reflection. He was not aware that the tramp of his heavy shoes resounded through the house, but kept on step, step, step, like a sentinel on duty, till at last the door opened, and the bright face of Gillian Bentley looked in.

"Ah, it is you, Uncle Daniel, and all alone," she said, closing the door after her. "I'm so glad. Every thing seems strange and still here. I cannot sleep, try ever so much. Don't look at me so. Indeed I tried, but the moon came blinking in through the hickory branches, and up I sprang, put on my dressing-gown, huddled myself into a shawl, and sat down by the open window till I am quite chilled through."

"It was dangerous business," said Hart, with a quiver in his voice. "Like your mother, too—very like your mother, gal."

"Ah, I was thinking of her, my poor mother, when the moonlight came in: it seems as if she must be somewhere in this old house waiting for me, Uncle Hart. You're not sleepy, I am sure, by the way you walk. Sit here in this great chair, and let me snuggle down on the footstool by your knee, while you tell me about my mother—my splendid, beautiful mother—for I have her features here, deep, deep in my heart. It was the first memory of my life buried there, Uncle Daniel."

Gillian threw one arm over the farmer's shoulder, and with a little gentle force led him back to the oak chair, while she sunk down to the stool at his feet with the grace and sweep of a bird of paradise when it settles to rest.

"There now, Uncle Daniel, just imagine me your daugh-

ter ten years old, determined to be naughty and to keep you up half the night, while I try to believe that you have given me one good scolding, and made up as a dutiful papa is bound to do."

"Wall," said Uncle Daniel, and a broad smile swept over his face, spite of the trouble that spoke in his voice, "Wall, now, what shall we talk about? What can an old chap like me have to say to a fine lady that comes down at midnight in her silks and satins like a queen, and wants to make believe sociable? It's like a game-cock coming in among a lot of guinea hens and turkey gobblers: they have nothing to do but to give up the yard and huddle under some old cart out of the way."

"Am I so very unlike everybody here, then?" said Gillian, in a tone of childish mortification. "What is it—my poor old dressing-gown and this shawl? Indeed I'd nothing else. Somebody packed them on the very top of the trunk."

With a pretty flush on her face, and a degree of eager haste, which proved her quite earnest in her shame, she wrapped the blue silk dressing-gown, with its soft facing of swan's-down, close about her, and strove to cover it under the rich folds of a camel's-hair shawl, with a delicate azure ground, and overrun with great palm leaves, in which a thousand gorgeous tints struggled into contrast, or slept in harmony.

"There now, dear uncle, that I am getting respectable, please tell me if I look the least bit like my poor mamma?"

The old man gazed down on that bright face till his eyes filled with tears. He did not speak, but lifted his hand and laid it on her head.

"A little," said Gillian, smiling through the mist that

shone in her eyes. "Just the least little bit, please: say that much."

"Yes, gal, you're like our Sarah—just as a wild rose from the swamp puts you in mind of a damask rose in a garden. I should a known you was her darter if I'd met you in Kamtschatka. She hadn't your fine feathers, but no one could mistake about your being birds of the old nest."

"Yes, that's it," cried Gillian. "That's the way I feel here—like a poor little bird that's been flying and flying among the myrtles without settling anywhere; but once under the old hickory tree, that is rattling its nuts down to the frosty grass this minute, the tired birdie longs to folds its wings and feel at home. It's like living a dream over again to find myself here."

"And this is the way she used to talk," said Hart, gazing with looks of wistful fondness into the beautiful face uplifted to his.

"Who? my mother? Did she feel like a bird glad to rest?"

"No, like a bird forever wanting to try the wing. From the time she was ten years old she was always talking of the foreign parts she intended to visit; the people she meant to know; and the things she meant to do."

"Why, Uncle Daniel, did my mother have such ideas?"

"Yes, yes, she did strange things in her fancy, just as she travelled over strange countries."

"But she was very young—not much over my age when she died."

"When she died?"

"Yes, when she died. Two or three years older, perhaps, but not more than that."

"Then you remember the time?"

"Yes, but not the circumstance. We were in Naples. I remember their coming to the convent where I had been left for some reason, and telling me I no longer had a mother—that she was gone."

"And this was all?"

"No. One day when I asked for the place where my mother was laid, the old nurse took me up to a beautiful spot back of Naples, where you could hardly see the graves for the roses that blossomed over them—not for a week or a month, but all the year around—and told me that was the place where I must seek for her."

"And did you find the spot?"

"I don't know. Neither the nurse nor I could read. We could only guess where she lay by the brightness of the roses; but we found a little hollow on the hill-side, completely choked up with blossoms. The loveliest spot you ever set eyes on, so shaded that the softest moss crept over the little marble slabs all around, except one, and that was pure and white as snow. We picked that out for the one and came away."

"And this is all you know of your mother?"

"What more should I know, poor, little child that I was? Papa never speaks of her; no other human being that I ever saw knew any thing about her: that was why there was no sleep for me to-night, till I had come down and had a talk with you."

"It was the way she used to come when any thing troubled her," said Hart, looking thoughtfully into the fire.

"And that proves how much we are alike. I wasn't so certain about the nice old lady, or even Cousin Hannah;

but the moment I felt your hand on my head I was sure of you."

The old farmer shook in his chair; he was almost crying.

"That's right, gal—that's right. It's the way Sarah Hart's darter should feel on coming home. It's the way she would have felt herself if she—but what has become of her? God help us all—when did she die—where did she die?"

Gillian turned suddenly pale. Her eyes grew wild and large.

"Oh, uncle, what a strange question!"

"Every thing about her is strange," muttered Hart, shaking his head doubtfully. "I don't know how to talk or what to say; secrets always trouble me, especially when I don't understand them. In all these years never to have heard a word: and now to be, as it was, knocked down with a single word, and left to brood over it. Young lady, what kind of a man is your father?"

"My father—my father! Why, Uncle Hart, who ever thought of asking that question before? What child ever did ask it? Why he is a grand, true man, gentle as an angel, and proud as—as an emperor. With wise men he is always the wisest; with good men he seems best of all. I never saw a human being that dared to take a liberty with papa, and yet he is mild and kind as a little child."

"But you haven't dared to ask him right straightforward about your own mother and her folks."

"That's true, and yet I could not tell the reason to save my life."

"It's because there's something kept back."

"No, I hope not—I hope not," murmured Gillian, thoughtfully.

"You wasn't afraid to ask me about her?"

"Not in the least. I only hesitated a little about the time of night, that is all."

"Now tell me what you want to know."

"Every thing."

"Very well: why not? There ain't nothing to tell that a body need be ashamed on; and you'll never see the day, gal, bright and peart as you be, that Sarah Hart mightn't have gone ahead of her own child."

"I'm sure of that. It's just what I was hoping to hear. It's so pleasant to look up to one's own parents. Well——"

Gillian folded both her white hands over the farmer's knee, and looked up to him with her eyes brimfull of tender expectation.

"Well!"

CHAPTER VI.

OLD TIMES AND THEIR ROMANCE.

"How much you are like her, child!" said Hart, stooping over Gillian. "Wall, I feel like talking about her to-night.

"Sarah was a good deal younger than I or than her sister Hetty; but neither on us could hold a candle to her. When she sot her mind on a thing, she would have her own way, and always got it in the end. There was only three of us, and Sarah, being the youngest, was the pet of the whole family, till, like pets in general, she took the lead."

"Of course," said Gillian, laughing softly. "Why not? I dare say she was just the sort of person to lead off with a grace. Well, you spoiled her among you, and of course she paid you for it: nothing can be more natural."

"I dare say, gal—I dare say it all came in the nat'ral course of things; but she was a downright good-natured creature after all, and loved us, I'm sure of that."

"Of course she did: who could help it? Why, Uncle Daniel, it isn't ten hours since I saw you on that great, fat, roly poly old horse, and I love you dearly already; certainly she loved you."

"Yes, yes, I don't doubt it; though, to own the truth, I never could quite understand our Sarah. She was like an April day; you couldn't tell whether it would be storm, or sunshine, or a dull, heavy rain, twenty-four hours together! She was a great reader, and took up painting flowers and all sorts of fol-de-rol accomplishments, naturally as a bird takes to fruit. I declare it almost took my breath sometimes to find out all she knew. Your Aunt Hetty was considered a girl of pretty good larning, but she had to study hard for her knowledge; while Sarah seemed to pick up her lessons on the wing: but the two gals loved each other dearly.

"I raly believe Hetty would have died for her sister any day; but as for Sarah, she was capable of something more than that: she used to pet and protect Hetty in any little difficulty, as if she had been the oldest. She had to do this a good deal, one time or another, for your grandfather was a stern old man, and kept a tight rein on his family, especially the gals.

"We lived on the old place here, and might have got along in the world, but the old man indorsed for one of his neighbors, and when called on to pay up, he was

obliged to mortgage the homestead, and that gave us all the first hard push down-hill.

"Father was a proud man, and looked upon debt as a disgrace. After this trouble came on, he was more severe and rigid in all his notions than ever. This made every thing gloomy and uncomfortable for the gals, and even Sarah began to feel down-hearted at times.

"The old man used to say it wasn't so much the money that troubled him as the feeling that his fellow-men was ready to take advantage at every step on the highway of life. His confidence in mankind was shook, and that is a terrible misfortune with a man like your grandsire, I can tell you. Your grandfather raised the money on his place down in York, from a young fellow that had more than he knew what to do with. That led to the rich man's coming up into these parts to look at the property. His name was Bentley."

"What? my father?" cried Gillian, deeply interested.

"No, but your father's cousin—a handsome, genteel young feller as you ever sot eyes on. He'd just come of age, and felt his oats, I can tell you. Of course your grandfather invited the young chap to put up at the homestead, that was now a'most as good as his own property. It was winter time when he came up, and such sleighing: you don't find any thing like it now-a-days—snow three feet deep on the turnpike, and trod down as hard as a miser's feelings.

"We had two spans of horses in the barn that would match any thing this side of the river; and a great double-seated sleigh, not to mention a pony and a cutter that skimmed the snow like a bird flying. Besides all this, it was mighty comfortable in-doors. Grandma was great on buckwheat-cakes, and we had lots of maple molasses; and as for her mince-pies, they beat every thing.

"With all this the homestead wasn't a disagreeable place to stay in. The gals did their part, too, and kept a bright hickory fire in the out-room there in the wing, which was enough of itself to light up the red and green stripes of the home-made carpet, and made the tall, brass and-irons glitter like gold on the hearth.

"It raly was a purty sight in the evening, when the gals came down-stairs sleeked up like a couple of new pins: Hetty, with her brown hair twisted up behind, and shining like velvet; and Sarah, with her hair in soft, thick curls, that seemed to catch the firelight the minute she came in. Oh, she was a bright, happy cretur—was sister Sarah in those days; springy as a willow branch, and rosy as an apple tree in bloom.

"I remember that winter she wore a blue merino dress that fitted close up to her neck, with sleeves tight to her arms, which sloped down beautifully to her wrists. Little ruffles—I've seen her crimp 'em a hundred times with my penknife,—fell over her hands, and stood up like a pretty border of snow around her neck. I tell you she looked like a princess by the side of little Hetty, with her shy, brown eyes, and her dark dress, and her half frightened way.

"I didn't go a great deal into the out-room while young Bentley was there. What with feeding cattle, getting out fence-rails, and doing up the chores, I got purty well tired out afore night, and so sot down in the kitchen with the old folks; besides I had a little business of my own to attend to across the hill, that took up my Sunday nights; and maybe an evening or so in the week time.

"Martha's mother lived over in that direction; and, when the gals were in the out-room with young Bentley, I naturally enjoyed myself best tother side of the hill. I don't pretend to compare the gal that I married in the

end, to our Sarah—that wasn't to be thought of; but she had a way about her like my oldest sister, and in all the neighborhood there wasn't a better housekeeper, or a kinder wife, than she made me up to the time of her death."

Here Uncle Daniel drew one hand across his eyes, and paused a moment to get his voice. Gillian took the other hand in hers, and laid her cheek against it in a sweet, caressing way, that made the old man sob out,

"Oh, don't, don't, it goes too straight home!"

Then Gillian dropped his hand quite reverently, and bent her eyes on the fire, afraid of disturbing him again.

"When a young fellow is in love, it's like a dream, you know, and almost any thing may happen around him without being noticed. I was too much taken up with my own feelings for any very distinct idea of what was going on at home. It sometimes did strike me that Mr. Bentley stayed a good while at the homestead, and that Sarah seemed to enjoy his society very much, but it gave me no sort of uneasiness; for, though the young fellow was a splendid-looking critter, and rich enough to buy out half of Rockland county, our Sarah was a match for him, or any other man that ever wore shoe-leather.

"As for Hetty, dear, quiet Hetty, I never thought about her at all; she wasn't the sort of gal, you know, to take much to the young fellows. She was so hard to get acquainted with, always keeping, as it were, behind her harnsome sister.

"Sometimes I would just go into the out-room in the edge of evening, not to appear unsociable, and every thing seemed comfortable enough. Sometimes the girls had their knitting work out, while Bentley read to them; sometimes I found him holding the skein of yarn on his two hands, while Sarah stood before him winding it off.

She had a dexterous way of twirling the ball round in the fingers of her left hand, that made it come out sloped like a lemon with a hole in the centre. Your grandma taught her the trick, and young Bentley used to torment her to show him the way it was done; but he was sure to spoil the shape of her ball, when she was ready to box his ears, and never let him off till he unwound it again.

"One evening, I remember going in after he had tangled up her yarn so that it was impossible to unravel it. She was on her knees before the hearth, blushing and laughing, as she tried to make the thread run evenly from a heap of yarn he had left on the floor; the firelight struck through her curls till they shone like floss gold, and she now and then lifted her eyes to his in a way that brought my heart into my mouth. It was frank and open like a child's; but he was looking down upon her, and I didn't like the way her eyes fell, or to see her neck and face turn scarlet when she saw Hetty and I looking so steadily at her.

"Hetty seemed to be took back more than I was. To own the truth, mebby I shouldn't have noticed it much if she hadn't looked so white, and if her eyes hadn't met mine with a wild sort of glitter in them that I had never seen before.

"Well, after a little, Sarah, what with breaking and pulling, unsnarled the yarn, and got up from her knees, laughing in a forced way, and flinging back her curls with a saucy toss of her head, which made me a'most want to kiss her without another word; but Hetty looked more sober than ever, so I put on a serious face, and says I,

"'Well, gals, what do you and Mr. Bentley say to a sleigh-ride? The moon's out, and the sky is chuck full of stars. There's just frost enough to give the snow a

glitter, and to make the bells heard a mile off. Supposing we take a drive over the hill, and call on ——'

"'Oh, yes,' says Sarah, clapping her hands, 'it'll be an excuse for Dan to call at the Deacon's three times this week: I thought he looked restless at tea-time. What do you say, Hetty, dear?—as for Mr. Bentley, of course he goes or stays, as we determine.'

"Mr. Bentley laughed and said, 'He was ready to follow the ladies anywhere;' at which the gals ran up-stairs to get their things, and I went to the barn to hitch up the team.

"In less than ten minutes I was at the front door, with as harnsome a span of gray horses as you ever saw, all covered with bells, and crazy to be off. It was a double-seated sleigh, with plenty of buffalo robes, and two little foot-stoves in the bottom, that your grandma brought out to keep the gals' feet warm.

"Out came the two gals in their long cloaks, trimmed with fur, and black velvet bonnets with ostrich plumes fluttering at the sides, each with her purty face buried in a muff.

"Hetty came down to the side of the sleigh first, while Sarah stood dancing up and down on the steps to keep her feet warm.

"'Come, Hetty,' says I, a-holding out one hand, 'you set with me and help drive.' She seemed a little out of sorts, you know, and I saw her turn away from Mr. Bentley when he came up. This was the reason I asked her to set in front with me.

"She drew back behind her muff, and I saw her look suddenly up at Bentley.

"'Oh, yes! get in, get in!' he said, smiling. 'Come, Miss Sarah.'

"Hetty caught hold of my hand and sprang into the sleigh without a word. I was busy holding in the team with one hand, and pulling up the buffalo skins around Hetty with the other, and scarcely noticed what the pair behind were doing till Bentley called out:

"'Here we are, snug and comfortable. Touch the horses up with a flourish, Hart: I feel like a bird to-night!'

"'A bird of passage, or a bird of prey?' said Sarah, mischievously. 'One thing is certain, Dan, he is in the wrong nest. I would much rather have sister Hetty by me.'

"Hetty did not pretend to hear, but I felt her shiver as if with the sudden cold, and pulled the robe over her again, saying, softly that 'Hetty belonged to me.'

"As I tightened the reins and shook out my whip, it seemed to me that I heard a sob, but that minute the horses started, the bells gave a loud clash, and away we whirled around the house, and up the turnpike like a flash of lightning set to music.

"If you want to see rale downright fun, gal, try a genuine sleigh-ride on a night like that. Horses with their blood on fire—bells running over with music—roads beat down to marble—snow-balls rattling from the horses' hoofs—clouds of steam pouring from their nostrils and freezing into little icicles on the under jaw—whip cracking on the frosty air, and all the naked trees, with every twig and bough pictured on the snow-crust that spreads and glitters miles and miles around you—with the moon smiling overhead, and lots on lots of stars blinking and sparkling in its path. I tell you agin, gal, if there is genuine fun in the world, that's it."

"Oh, how I should like to have one good ride like that!" said Gillian, sparkling all over with excitement.

"You shall, gal: when snow comes you shall, or my name isn't Daniel Hart," said the farmer, heartily.

"With such horses, plenty of bells, and you to drive, uncle?"

"Yes, yes, we'll have the old times over again. Trust Uncle Dan for the team: he's up to a winter campaign yet."

"And we shall take the same road, and stop at the deacon's?"

The farmer drew back in his chair.

"The same road? Stop at the deacon's? God help us, gal, the deacon, his wife, and that young creature, has been dead these ten years. The old house is torn down, and the grave-yard crowds close up to the road as you pass. No, Gillian: you shall have the sleigh-ride, but we must go round the hill, not over it, as we did that night."

"Well, you had a pleasant evening, then, uncle; and that is a great deal, because the memory of one happy evening lives forever, you know—forever and ever: so tell me of that one happy ride, and we will trust Heaven for the next, which is sure to come—for I always find my wishes sooner or later, like fairy gifts, dear uncle."

The old man looked down upon her with a glance of hearty affection.

"Always chirk and full of hope, just as she was!"

"But I'm afraid—just the least bit afraid, you know, uncle—that my dear mamma was making a fool of Mr. Bentley; you remember about the back seat, and all that?"

"It may be, I don't pretend to understand it up to this day. Your mother was a young critter that none of us could calculate upon; not even Hetty, who always says that we had no right to judge her, because she was so far above us all."

"Then that pale little lady—Aunt Hetty—how strange it seems that you should be telling of sleigh-rides which she enjoyed, just as I should now. That nice little lady remembers and loves my mother yet. I'll go and kiss her in the morning, hang back as she will—just see if I don't."

"Yes, if ever one human being loved another, Hetty loved your mother: to this day, she never mentions her name without growing pale and shivering, as if she was a-cold."

"Dear lady!"

"That night she seemed troubled about something; but we had not driven a mile before she took her hand out of its muff, and turning round, held it out to Sarah, smiling so sweetly in the starlight, and saying, in her low, mild way:

"'Is not this a lovely evening, Sarah?'

"Then Sarah stooped forward and pretended to whisper, while she kissed Hetty on the cheek, and insisted on changing seats, which Hetty would not think of, till young Bentley leaned forward and whispered something, which I could not hear in the clash of the bells.

"Hetty got up pleasantly, while Sarah threw back the buffalo robes, and sprang over into the seat at my side, laughing gleefully all the time, and flinging her arms around me to steady herself.

"Then we all settled down again, and I started the horses with a crack of the whip that set them off like lightning; and in less than ten minutes we were sitting round a great wood-fire in Deacon Warner's west room, with a tray of red-cheeked apples glowing on the hearth, and a great stone pitcher of ginger cider hissing under the red-hot poker that the deacon was warming it up with.

"Bentley rather hung back when the deacon handed round the cider-mug covered with yaller froth, but after he fairly took hold there was no stopping him.

"I dare say you wouldn't have thought much of that evening; but I consider it about as near heaven as a feller is likely to reach on this side the grave. There was my two sisters, looking like angels in the fire-light; and there was the gal I loved better than my own life, holding the tray of apples on her knee, while she tried one, and then another, with her thumb and finger, searching out the mellowest for them; and there was Mrs. Warner, knitting away for dear life by a little round candle-stand, and Deacon Warner on both knees in the corner cracking but-nuts with a big hammer, which he handed round after the apples and cider.

"Yes, Gillian, that was a pleasant evening, take it all together. We counted apple-seeds, and swung red parings three times round, dropping them into letters on the floor. Mine always would turn out an M—our Martha was named after her mother, you know—and both Sarah's and Hetty's were exact B's, at which both blushed and looked at each other so shyly.

"It really was a very pleasant evening, especially after I went back the last time, after settling the rest in the sleigh, and took a last drink of cider, and a kiss that was worth ten thousand times as much. Certainly it was one of the pleasantest evenings that I ever spent.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CLOVE ROAD.

"A LITTLE while after this Mr. Bentley went to New York; and, in a week or two, Hetty started down there on a visit to an aunt of ours in the city. She only went for two or three weeks, but, somehow, it was spring before she was ready to come home: I remember very well the daffadowndillas were out in the garden before she got back. If it hadn't been for my wedding I don't believe that we would have seen her so soon, for she seemed restless and homesick enough all the spring.

"I forgot to tell you that Sarah went to visit her aunt late in the winter, and came home with Hetty. She, too, was a good deal sobered down, and all her sparkling cheerfulness had died out. I couldn't help seeing, at times, that she cried a good deal in the night, for her eyes were red, and she looked worn and tired of a mornin', as if something lay heavy on her mind.

"I asked about Mr. Bentley, and if the gals had seen him often; but they seemed shy of the subject, and I calculated that he hadn't been sociable in the city, as they had a right to expect he would be. Altogether every thing at home seemed to go wrong, and if it hadn't been a busy time with me just before my wedding, I should have insisted on knowing the reason why.

"But I got married, and while my young wife was

getting ready for housekeeping, I spent purty much all the time at Deacon Warner's, so happy myself that I near about forgot the gals. Something happened, though, that troubled me a little.

"The post-office was about half way between our house and Deacon Warner's, and one morning, when I was riding home bright and early, who should I see but our Sarah, with her white sun-bonnet and shawl on, a-going into the post-office with a letter in her hand. She came out after a minute, and, before I could ride up, turned into a footpath that gave her a short cut across the meadows.

"I always stopped at the office for letters and papers as I went along, so I rode up to the door, calling out to know if there was any thing for our folks. The post-master came to the door with a paper in his hand and a letter, which he handed to me, saying,

"'Mr. Hart, I can't quite make this direction out: it seems to be for New York city, but the writing isn't clear.'

"I took the letter. It was directed to William Bentley, Esq., in Sarah's handwriting, but I could hardly make it out; the letters seemed to have been tumbled down over the paper.

"The whole thing took me by surprise. What on 'arth could Sarah be writing to that young feller about? And why didn't she wait and send the letter to the post-office by me, as everybody else did? While I sat puzzling over it the post-master stood a-looking at me.

"'I reckon you can't make it out more than I can,' says he, laughing, and eying me sort of curious, as if he thought there was something strange about the letter. This brought me to myself.

"'Oh, yes,' says I, 'it's all plain enough: put it into

the York mail and it'll go straight. If you've sent any before you ought to know that.'

"It was mean to pry into Sarah's secrets in that way, but I didn't think of it then.

"'No,' says he, 'I never sent any in that handwriting afore, and I shouldn't a known it if Miss Sarah hadn't brought the letter herself.'

"'Well, she's saved me the trouble,' says I. 'Good-morning,' and off I rode.

"Just where the footpath crossed the road below our house I met Sarah, walking along with her head down, as if she was counting the dandelions in her path.

"'Hallo, Sarah,' says I, a-riding close to the fence just as she came up, 'what on earth brought you out so arly in the morning?'

"She looked up with a start, and half a scream; then I saw that she had been crying, for drops hung on her eye-lashes, and though she tried to laugh, it was more like sobbing.

"'Oh, Dan, is it you?' she said, turning round so that I needn't see her brush the tears away. 'It's a beautiful morning, isn't it? I've found ever so many violets by the brook up yonder, and as for dandelions, the whole meadow lot is golden with them; then the peppermint is just beginning to sprout; capital weather for whitening cloth, isn't it? has Martha got her webs on the grass yet?'

"She spoke all in a hurry, huddling her words together, and catching breath at every stop; her eyes kept turning from one thing to another, and the color came and went in her face, as if she was half frightened to death; and so she was, poor thing!

"I felt like choking, it seemed so unnatural for Sarah

to act in that way, and at last I says, 'Sarah,' says I, 'what have you been writing to Mr. Bentley about? And why didn't you keep the letter for me to carry?'

"She turned as white as new milk, and her eyes glanced on me with a wild look, as I've seen rabbits do when the trap was opened; but this look didn't last long; all at once her eyes brightened up, and she turned on me in her old, saucy way.

"'What is it to you how my letters get to the post-office,' says she, 'or who I write to either? One woman's as much as you can manage, and she lives over the hill. Leave me to take care of my own business!'

"'But what can you have to write about?' says I, feeling my face grow hot, for it was no joke to wrastle with our Sarah when her grit was up.

"'Well,' says she, trying to laugh, 'supposing I wanted him to send me a book of poems that's just come out—is there any harm in that?'

"'No, not if you sent the money to pay for it, and father made no objections.'

"'Father!' says she, and her lips turned cold and white; 'father! what is the use in mentioning a trifle like that to him?'

"'It isn't a trifle if you make a secret of it, Sarah,' says I, almost sternly.

"'You—you won't mention it,' says she, coming close to the fence, and clasping her hands on the upper rail. 'That's a dear, good brother now, do mind your own business; scold your wife—I dare say it will do her good; but don't concern yourself about what you will never understand; it can only make mischief.'

"'This is very strange, Sarah,' I was going to say, but she stopped me with a wave of her hand.

"'There—there! I tell you, Daniel Hart, I am doing every thing for the best. You have no right to think otherwise. Let me alone—oh, let me alone!'

"She held up her clasped hands when she spoke, as a little child prays, and the tears rolled down her cheeks as I've seen the dew fall from a rose in the morning. I shook my head; then her face fell forward on her hands, and she began to sob.

"'Oh, Dan, brother Dan, you are cruel to me—very, very cruel. This comes of getting married: you do not care for us now. It would be a nice thing to get your poor sister into trouble about nothing. You and your wife would enjoy it, I dare say. She put you up to it, I know that. Well, I have lost my brother, that's all—my only brother, that never refused me any thing till now!'

"Sarah,' says I, after a swaller or two—for somehow I felt the tears rising—'Sarah, I dare say it's all about nothing; only you want to be romantic, and have secrets, like the heroines in books; but somehow these things don't work themselves out clear in real life. You're young, and so full of bright whims that I sometimes feel anxious about you. It would break my heart, dear, if any harm should come to you; so don't be mad because I ask questions—it's all for your own good, Sarah.'

"She began to sob like a baby.

"'I know—I know it is; but don't say any thing more about that letter: it's given me trouble enough without that, I'm sure.'

"I felt sorry for the poor gal, but yet it did'nt seem right to let her go on writing to a dashing young feller in secret.

"'If it goes so agin the grain to talk with me, promise one thing, and I'll be content: just tell sister Hetty all

about it. She's a sober, steady gal, and won't sanction any thing that has danger in it: tell her about the letter, and I won't interfere.'

"She looked up so earnestly into my face; at last her eyes began to sparkle, and she laughed.

"'Hetty?' says she; 'you will leave it with Hetty?'

"'Yes, I can trust Hetty; only tell her all about it, fair and square—promise that.'

"'Oh, yes, I promise that!' says she, laughing again, though her eyes filled with tears; 'but you must make me a promise also.'

"'Well, what is it?' says I, laughing too—for I was relieved at the thought of trusting the affair with our Hetty.

"'That you won't mention the letter to any living soul—not even to your wife.'

"'Well, I promise that.'

"'Nor mother; and above all, not to father,' she went on, earnestly.

"I thought it over a minute, and made the promise.

"'Nor—nor to Hetty either,' says she, looking at me as if afraid that I would refuse.

"'Well,' says I, 'pledge me your sacred word of honor that you will tell Hetty every thing, and I will not mention the subject again. She will keep you straight, I'm sure of that.'

"'I pledge my sacred word of honor,' says she, gravely, while the tears swam in her eyes.

"'That's a good gal,' says I, reaching out one hand. 'There, now, give me a kiss, and jump on behind.'

"She sprang to the top of the fence, puckered up her lips till they glowed like an apple-blossom, and gave me an old-fashioned kiss, that went straight to the heart.

"'There, you old darling,' says she, throwing her shawl across the horse, springing up behind me as light as a bird, and clasping my waist with an affectionate hug, 'there, you blessed old darling, we're friends again; so now strike into a trot as quick as you like, but don't tell anybody that I've been farther than the Spring Meadow, or they'll torment me to death with questions.'

"I promised to keep her secret, and put the horse on his metal. He was used to carrying double, and went off like an arrow.

"Hetty stood on the stoop as we rode up, looking down the road. She turned and went into the house without speaking a word, and Sarah followed her, looking down-hearted enough. I suppose she hated to tell about the letter.

"Well, about a week after this an answer came to the letter in Bentley's handwriting. I had told Sarah not to inquire for it, for the manner of the post-master didn't quite please me. I was right; for when the letter came, he made a great mystery about it, and wanted to send a private message; but I cut the matter short, asked for the letter, and carried it off.

"Sarah trembled like a leaf when I gave it to her—tore it open, then put it into her bosom, blushing and turning white every instant, while Hetty stood looking at her, still as death.

"'Remember your promise,' says I to Sarah.

"She took the letter from her bosom, and going up to Hetty, handed it to her, though she had not read a word herself.

"'There,' says she, flushing red, and turning her face full on mine, 'will that satisfy you?'

"Hetty took the letter without a word, and seemed to

read it steadily, but she did not turn over the page, and after sitting still a while, got up and went into the house.

"Sarah followed her, and just as I was preparing to go away again, came to the stoop smiling, quite out of breath.

"'There, it is all right,' she whispered. 'Next week Mr. Bentley will be here with his cousin—another Mr. Bentley—and then you will know what he has been writing about.'

"I felt relieved by her words, and rode over to the deacon's happier than I had been for a week.

"I saw but little of the gals after that, for they were too busy preparing the house for visitors; every thing was at sixes and sevens—carpets taken up—curtains hung—counterpanes whitened—and ceilings whitewashed for the day that young Bentley and his cousin were expected; every thing was in order, and the old homestead looked cheerful as a spring morning. The fire-places were full of hemlock and pine-tops; and at every corner you found an old mug or pitcher crowded full of apple-blossoms, lilacs, and snow-balls, till the rooms were scented like a garden.

"The gals looked as purty as picters that afternoon, in their white muslin dresses, bowed up in front with blue ribbons; but they seemed restless and anxious, as if they didn't know what to do with themselves.

"Toward night we all went out into the stoop—for my wife had come over, and looked as nice as any of them, if Sarah was the most beautiful—and they made a purty show, fluttering around in their white dresses, like so many pigeons waiting to be fed. At last, just as the sun was beginning to sink behind the hills, we saw a carriage coming round a curve of the turnpike, that you can see

from the stoop away down the valley. It was moving along what we call the dug road, with a steep hill on one side, and a precipice below—a dangerous spot always for skittish horses, and one I never liked to travel in the night.

"Just as we saw Mr. Bentley's carriage appear on this road, a stage-coach came over the hill, thundering along as if it had lost time. That minute the blast of a horn rung through the valley, and while it filled the air, a sharp cry from one of the gals made us all catch our breath.

"'See! see!' shrieked Sarah, flinging up her arms. 'Oh, my God, have mercy!—have mercy!'

"Her wild eyes were bent on the distance: we followed them in terror. The stage was thundering down the hill; we caught one glimpse of the carriage, which went over and over down the precipice; the sharp yell of the horses came to where we stood—and then all was still. I looked around; Hetty lay cold and stiff as death on the stoop, while Sarah fell down at her side, holding on to her with both arms, and moaning as if her heart was broken.

CHAPTER VIII.

DOWN THE PRECIPICE.

"YOUR grandfather and I brought out the horses and drove like lightning to the spot. We turned down a cross-road and so along the foot of the precipice, knowing well enough that it was of no use looking for them at the

top; for, a long way off, we could see one wheel of the carriage where it was wedged in between two rocks, and that most awful of all sounds, the groans of a horse, reached us long before we came in sight of the poor critter, where it lay among the loose stones at the foot of the ledge, with a part of the broken carriage across his back. He began to whinny as pitiful as a hurt baby when we came in sight; and, anxious as we were about the human souls, I hadn't the heart to go by without cutting him loose from his mate, which had broken his neck, and was dead as a door nail.

"A little higher up the hill, where the earth sloped down from the foot of the rocks, we saw your father sitting on a piece of rock, and holding his cousin's head in his lap. We hollered out to know if all was right; but he didn't answer: there wasn't breath enough in his body to force out a word, but his look was awful. I never set my eyes on so white a face in all my life.

"We held on by the brushwood and climbed up to where he sat with the dead man across his knees. I don't know which was the palest, his or the cold face turned upward, as he searched for a breath of life.

"I had never seen your father before, but should have known him by the look of his cousin; for, one in his cold death, and the other so still and panic-struck, looked so much alike that I could hardly tell which was killed or which saved. At first I thought it really was our young Bentley that asked us, in a faint voice, to try if we could do nothing toward bringing the form across his knee to life. But a glimpse of the dead face put me right; so I and the old man knelt down and tried our best to bring the poor fellow to, but it was of no use: his temple had struck against a sharp point of rock, and the skull was

crushed in, only in one spot, but it was enough to send him into eternity. God have mercy upon him, he was gone to his last account.

"We lifted the dead body from your father's arms and carried it down the hill. While father and I were weaving some hemlock boughs together for a kind of bier to carry him on, your father came slowly down, looking pale as ever, and with one arm hanging loose and limp by his side. It was easy enough to see that it was broke, though he said nothing, only pressing his lips hard as they grew white with pain, and giving out a sharp breath now and then. We helped him to mount father's horse, and, laying the dead body carefully on the rough bier, turned toward home.

"We hadn't but just got to the cross-roads when sister Sarah came up, without a sign of a bonnet on, and her hair all afloat. There wasn't a bit of color in her face, and I hardly knew her at first, for her eyes seemed as large again as natural, and, though blue enough when she was cheerful, they shone out deep and black as a thunder-cloud now.

"She gave one sharp look, first at the man on horseback, then at the poor fellow my father and I carried on our shoulders. Then she flung up her arms, and sent out a cry so sharp and full of pain, that we stood stock still, frightened to the heart by it.

"She seemed to be afraid of coming near us, but went close up to the horse on which your father rode, and, laying her hand on the mane, asked something in a hoarse whisper.

"He answered her in a low voice, for he was too faint for loud words; but I knew that he was telling her the man we carried was dead.

"She let her hand fall from the neck of his horse, and stood still, as if his words had frozen her. I was loaded down with the dead, and could not go to comfort her: so when we moved on, she followed after, with great, heavy tears rolling down her face, and raising a sob now and then that it would have broken your heart to hear.

"As we went on, moving slowly up the road, I saw sister Hetty coming toward us: she looked like one carrying a heavy load that she couldn't keep from staggering under. She saw us winding round a turn of the road, and her limbs seemed to wilt under her, for she sunk down to the grass and covered her face with both hands, as if the sight of us had struck her blind. Sarah ran forward, sending back a cry that almost made us tremble.

"She came up to Hetty and sunk down by her side, winding both arms around her neck, and sobbed dreadfully: we could hear her rods off; it really seemed as if her heart was breaking.

"Hetty did not look up or move; but when she heard our tramp on the road, she sort of stretched out her limbs with a quivering motion, and fell sideways on the grass, bringing Sarah, who clung around her, to the ground, and turning her sobs into screams.

"We stopped a minute, sat the bier down, and tried to comfort the gals; but they clung together, and I thought Sarah tried to bury Hetty's face in her lap till we took up the bier again. I felt very sorry for poor Sarah, for after that sleigh-ride, the letter and all the rest, it was easy guessing why her sobs were so quick and deep. As for Hetty, she always was a timersome, soft-hearted creature, and the sight of a dead man was enough to make her faint away any time.

"We went home and the gals followed, creeping heavily

along after us with the stillness of two ghosts. We laid young Bentley out in the spare room yonder; and, after helping the wounded young man up-stairs, I got him to bed, while your grandfather went after a doctor.

"The poor young fellow was in dreadful pain, but he choked back his groans and bore up like a hero. I was obliged to call Sarah to help to take care of him; but Hetty stayed below with the corpse, half scared to death I could see, for when I went down-stairs, once or twice in the night, she was sitting by the bed, as pale as the winding-sheet, and as still as the form it covered. Her eyes fairly frightened me when she looked toward the door—they darkened like a thunder-cloud before it bursts. I tried to make her go up-stairs, but she only shook her head, and so I left her all night alone with the dead man, and a terrible night it was to us all.

"We buried young Bentley in the grave-yard down yonder. It was a sorrowful business to us all, for we were uncertain who the heir might be, and, for any thing we knew, he might not prove exactly the person we should want to have power over the farm. So, with the sick man up-stairs, and a funeral going from the house, every thing seemed gloomy enough, especially as the gals went about like ghosts, scarcely speaking a word, and looking at each other wofully whenever they met.

"After a while we found out that Mr. Bentley, your father, was heir to his cousin, and in some sort owner of the farm. He was a splendid young fellow, too: with that face and voice of his he might have made any girl fall in love with him except our Hetty. I really don't think she ever cared for anybody in the world: she always was a quiet, old maidish thing.

"After the funeral she grew more shy and still than ever.

"But Sarah spent half her time in the sick man's room, and though she seemed troubled, yet I could see with half an eye that she was getting over the shock of her lover's death. I said lover, for after what I had seen nothing would have convinced me that our Sarah had not been heart and soul engaged to the young man who was gone; but if she could forget him and fancy the other, what business had any of us to interfere? For my part, I was glad to see her color coming back, and her eyes growing bright again.

"I don't know what passed between the young people during the six weeks that he lay sick at our house. But though she seemed wildly cheerful at times, the trouble never entirely left her eyes; and more than once I caught her crying away by herself, which was natural enough under the circumstances, you know.

"As Mr. Bentley grew better, and was able to carry his arm in a sling, Sarah's trouble seemed to increase, and she stayed with Hetty in their own room a great deal more than I ever remembered to have seen her before. It seemed as if she wanted to keep out of our visitor's way somehow.

"He did not seem to like this, and one morning, when I rode over to the homestead, and found him sitting lonesomely in the front stoop, he asked me in a quiet way if I could tell him what particular business his cousin had come to the country about, and why he himself had been so urgently invited to share the journey.

"I told him truly enough that I did not know; when he said, with a strange smile,

"'I almost supposed it might be a wedding that brought him here, from some words that he used in pressing the in-

vitation; but as no one of your family has said any thing about it, the object of his coming puzzles me exceedingly. Tell me, was our visit expected?'

"I was troubled how to answer this question, and felt the blood grow warm in my face. I remembered how anxious and restless my sister Sarah had been; those private letters, and the wild anguish with which she met us near the precipice, as we were bringing young Bentley away—things which our guest had doubtless been in too much pain to observe; but in reality I knew nothing, and what business had I to expose my sister's secret, if she had one?

"'No,' I said, angry with the redness of my face, 'I do not think our folks knew any thing about your coming; and as for a wedding, there has not been a sign of one, except my own, in the neighborhood this year.'

"Mr. Bentley eyed me keenly, as I said this, but did not seem quite satisfied.

"'It is strange,' he said, at last, 'but I am quite certain that my cousin told me his visit would end in a wedding; and he hinted that my services might be necessary to reconcile some difficulties that might arise with the family.'

"'But he mentioned no names?" I inquired, anxious to learn more.

"'No; he told me nothing more than I have already related. It is a singular affair altogether: perhaps my cousin's papers may give some clue.'

"I thought of my sister's letter, and felt myself coloring again, for any thing like secrecy made me restless. Your father looked at me suspiciously, so I turned away determined to speak with Sarah, and if there really was any thing between her and the dead to insist on her saying so frankly.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PACKAGE OF LETTERS.

"SARAH was up-stairs in her room, I was told. I went up the back way which leads to the upper chambers. Sarah's room was open, but she was not there; so, hearing a noise in the garret above, I mounted another flight of stairs which landed me in the open garret, where the trunk belonging to the dead man had been stored away.

"It was a common travelling-trunk, strong, and of ordinary size; but the lock had been wrenched in the overthrow, and its hasp was twisted from its fastening, so that no key was necessary to open it.

"I saw this at a glance, and also saw my sister Sarah kneeling before the trunk, holding up the lid with one hand while she searched among the papers it contained with the other. She was trembling from head to foot, and her face was pale as death.

"I stopped on the upper stair astonished by what I saw. Sarah was so eager and agitated that she did not hear me, but continued her search. I heard letters rustle against each other under her hand for a minute longer; then, with a faint cry, she snatched at something and started up from the floor, dropping the trunk-lid, and holding two or three letters tied up by a ribbon in her shaking hand.

"A single movement brought her face to face with me. She gave a sharp scream, drew back and sat down on the trunk, shaking all over and the teeth fairly chattering between her lips.

"She saw me looking at the letters, and clutched them tightly between both hands.

"'They are mine—my own letters,' she said, so frightened that her words came out in gasps. 'I have not touched a thing that was not my own."

"'Sarah, let me read those letters. I ought to know what they are about,' I said, resolutely, reaching out my hand.

"She crushed the letters together and held them behind her.

"'Never! How dare you? What right, I say? No, the letters are mine—mine—mine, I tell you.'

"She shook from head to foot. Her eyes grew fierce and black. I know that if I had strangled her, there and then, she would have clutched the parcel with her last gasp.

"'Sarah, I am your brother, and the very best friend you have in the world,' I said, for she was so frightened I pitied her from the bottom of my heart. 'Tell me what all this means. What is there that you should be afraid to tell?'

"'Afraid!' she said, 'yes, I am afraid. Let me go, then.'

"'Are you ashamed as well as frightened?' said I, almost sternly, for her terror seemed too great for that of an innocent person.

"'Ashamed!' she repeated my question over with her old scornful pride, 'ashamed! brother; how dare you?'

"Her eyes fairly blazed; her cheeks were like ashes. Then, all at once, her face changed, and drooping downward as if my question that moment had reached her in full force, she said, in the most heart-broken voice I ever heard,

"'Yes, brother, I am ashamed—God help us all!—and afraid too.'

"'Sarah, tell me all.'

"'Brother, I charge you, let me pass; do not make me more unhappy than I am,' she cried, passionately. 'Questions can do no good, for I will not answer them.'

"I seized her by both hands. She looked me steadily in the eyes, brave as a she-lion. I knew that it would be easier to rob a wild beast of its cubs than that girl of her secret. She stood still without a word. What right had I to use her in that rough way? She was my sister, and I was treating her like a thief. The letters were her own: I knew it by the address, part of which lay before my eyes. I dropped her hands.

"'Sarah,' I said, 'Mr. Bentley, the young man below, has some suspicion of this, and he has questioned me.'

"'And what did you tell him? What did you know?'

"'Nothing, sister—nothing."

"'But he—he said something. You began to suspect me, and came prying up here. Brother! brother!'

"There was scorn and grief in her words that would have made me sink into the earth if I had really done the thing she charged me with. As it was, my temper rose.

"'No, Sarah,' I said, ashamed that my voice would shake so. 'No, Sarah. Mr. Bentley, our visitor, said nothing that you have a right to be angry about.'

"'But he said something. Tell me what it was.'

"'He only asked what wedding it was that his poor cousin came to attend, Sarah.'

"'What wedding!' she cried, catching hold of my arm, and almost shaking me. 'What wedding! Did he say that? Did he in solemn truth mention a wedding?'

"'Yes, Sarah,' I answered, looking hard at her; 'and

I thought, from his way of wording it, that he had an idea that the cousin himself was coming to be married to some one in these parts.'

"I stopped short, for the sight of her face fairly made me hold my breath. Her cheeks, which had been pale as death before, kindled up; her lips parted with an eager expression, as if some iron spring had unlocked in them; and her eyes—Sarah had handsome eyes when she was pleased or angry—shone like stars.'

"'And you believed this? You thought, perhaps, that it was—was——'

"She stopped short, and the anxious paleness began to creep over her again.

"I understood her, and answered as if she had spoken out.

"'Yes, I did think that, Sarah. These letters, your strange ways, all came back to my mind; and why not? He was a smart young fellow, handsome and rich. The neighbors might have said it was a good match for you; but I think you were the mate for his betters any day—for the king on his throne, if such things could grow in a free country like ours, Sarah; so, if it was the truth, out with it. The fellow down-stairs seems mighty anxious to know all about his cousin's affairs. He spoke about searching the papers in that trunk.'

"Sarah clutched the letters in her hand, and laughed.

"'Well, let him search,' she said. 'It is an easy matter; the lock is torn open, and he will find but few papers.'

"'But those in your hand, Sarah!'

"She took my hand in hers, and with one of the winning gestures which no one could resist, lifted it to her lips, hard and brown as it was.

"'Don't, please don't ask me any more questions!' she

said. "It can do no earthly good, when a thing is over. Why give me so much pain? Can't you see how I suffer?'

"I took her close to my bosom, and kissed her cheek, ready to cry; for she could make a child of me any time. She kissed me back two or three times; then, leaning her head on my shoulder, began to sob.

"'Did you love him so much, darling?' I whispered, folding her close again.

"'Don't ask; but this other man—do not let him question you more; and, above all, keep my secret about the letters.'

"I started, and put her away from my bosom. This persistence in keeping a secret which was really no discredit offended me.

"'Sarah,' I said, 'this is worse than I would have believed of you. Why are you ashamed of this engagement?'

"'Think no ill of me, I charge you,' she said, starting back with a haughty throw of the head. "I have done right—will do right, but must be left alone!'

"'Very well,' I said, hurt by her want of confidence, 'you throw away my advice, and do not want my help. Good morning, Sarah. You have given me the heart-ache, that's all!"

"'No, no!' she said, drawing close to me again. 'I want your help just now. Only give it frankly, and without these terrible questions. I am not well. You can see that watching and crying has made me nervous and half sick. I was about to ask you about some way of strengthening myself up a little. Hetty, too, is worn out. In short, we want to get away from home: you know father promised us music-lessons in the city. I am sure

the sea-air will be good for us both. What do you think of it, Dan?'

"She spoke rapidly and half out of breath, darting quick glances at me from under her eyelashes, as if afraid that I would oppose her. In fact, I did feel like it at first; and was about to say so, but she caught the words from my lips, and broke out in a wild, pleading way that changed my feelings at once.

"'Don't, oh! don't say that, Dan! I am sick—suffering. If you won't send me away I shall go into a decline and die on your hands. Can't you see how I pine—how thin I grow?'

"She pulled up her sleeve and showed me her arm, which was slender enough to frighten one with the idea that she was really falling into a consumption. So I asked where she wished to go, and how long she wanted to be away.

"She thought that the best music-teachers could be found in New York, and she and Hetty could either put up with our aunt, or find some nice, quiet place for boarding in a private family, if their stay proved too long for a visit.

"She had thought the matter over very thoroughly, I could see that, and seemed to have set her heart on it. So I undertook to persuade the old people into letting her go, and promised that my wife, so far as possible, should come over and supply the gals' place while they were away.

"Sarah was full of gratitude. She kissed me again and again, and called me her kind, reasonable brother, and we parted excellent friends; but, so far as any information was concerned, just where we had met. But so it always was with your mother. She was sure to end

in having her own way, and in making everybody think it was best too.

"After this conversation, Sarah grew shy of young Mr. Bentley, and left him so much alone that he seemed to grow homesick, and began to talk about returning to the city. But the doctor, who did not get a patient of that stamp every day, would not hear of it, and so he stayed till the girls were ready for their trip to the sea-shore. I saw them when they set out—in fact I drove them down to the river, with my own team—and, of course, sat waiting while they took leave of Mr. Bentley in the front stoop. He was a good deal flurried and nervous. Sarah took her leave with a quiet, proud air, that seemed to chill him, for he went into the house and did not wait to see us drive off. But the old people stood there so long as we were in sight, following us with old-fashioned blessings—such blessings, Gillian, as no one has time to give in these fast days.

CHAPTER X.

THE SISTERS AWAY FROM HOME.

"It was six months before I saw the gals again. They stayed some time with Aunt Mary, and, after that, Sarah wrote us word that they had gone to the shore on Long Island, where board was cheap and sea-bathing capital. Sarah complained a great deal of her feeble health, but thought the coast air did her a world of good. She said very little about Hetty, only that she could not get along without her for a day. Her letters were short, but punctual. She seemed anxious to keep the old people satis-

fied with her long stay from home; and seldom wrote for money, as she and Hetty supplied themselves, she said, by doing fine needlework for a store in Broadway, which she went to the city, now and then, to get and return.

"It was fall before my sisters came home. The sea-air might have done them good, but they both looked thin and pale, as if overworked; and I reproached myself for letting them toil so hard for their own board so long, though, as I have told you, the old folks were in debt, and could not help it.

"Well, my sisters went to work again in the homestead, and the old place began to brighten up, for Sarah grew more easy and cheerful, saying that hard work was just what she wanted; while Hetty took up her old ways, only it seemed to us that she was more still and sad than ever, spending a great deal of time in her own room, where I sometimes saw a candle burning after eleven o'clock at night.

"Not long after they got back, I found out two secrets: one was, that Mr. Bentley had often visited the gals while with their aunt; and the other, that they brought needlework from New York, which they sat up nights to finish.

"Sarah was obliged to make me her confidant in this, for every month she wanted me to take her down to the river on her road to York, where she would be gone a day or two on a visit to her aunt. When I wanted to know why she took this extra work, and what she did with the money, she reminded me of her music-lessons that were to be paid for, and of a hundred pretty things which she and Hetty were always wanting, but, to my knowledge, never got.

"I think Sarah saw Mr. Bentley in some of these visits to the city, for she came back more and more cheerful

each month, but kept on working day and night all the same.

"On her third trip down the river she came back full of excitement, and told me, as a great secret, which I was to reveal to no one, that she had given up needle-work now. When I questioned her, she told me with blushes and half crying, for when a pleasant thing came to Sarah her eyes always would fill, though she bore trouble like a hero:—well, she told me that perhaps, if anybody asked her, she might get married some fine day, and we both laughed at the joke. She was very frank and happy during our drive home, for I met her at the boat as usual; and at last told me that she had seen Mr. Bentley in New York, and that he was coming up to the homestead in a week or two if—if I thought father would have no objection.

"'Objection! What objection could my father have to Mr. Bentley, whose conduct toward him and his had been more than kind? Surely he might expect to be made welcome in a house that was almost his own.'

"'Yes,' said Sarah, turning her face toward the sunset, though I could see a smile quivering on her lip, 'but—but Mr. Bentley wants to take me away with him; he thinks now that he loves me well enough for that!'

"I was rejoiced, and gave my horses a triumphant crack of the whip that sent them off on a run. I knew well enough that Sarah was no fit wife for any of the young fellows in our neighborhood. Her high spirits, her wit, and the bright thoughts that made every one admire her, were not gifts to be buried on a farm, nor drudged into tameness by hard work. I had knowledge of the world and sense enough to know that, if I had been brought up in the country. It would have been like

forcing a canary bird to dive for its food like a fish-hawk. But this was another affair.

"Your father was the man of all I had ever seen for the husband of a gal like our Sarah. With a college education, an honest, strong mind, as handsome a figure as you see in a day's walk, and any amount of property, where could another man be found like him? Yet I felt that Sarah was his match every inch of it: her virtues were home-virtues, and her studies home-studies, but genuine for all that. Even he could talk on but few subjects that Sarah did not know something about; and as for manners, if ever there was a born lady it was my sister Sarah, if I do say it.

"Sarah was delighted to see how I took the news, and told me in her old, frank way how she had loved Mr. Bentley long before she was quite certain that he cared for her—how he had almost proposed while she was with her aunt, but had been checked off when they went to the Long Island shore, without telling him a word about it, and seemed to have given her up without a struggle; but in her late visit she had met him by accident in the street; they had walked a long way together, she could not tell how or where, for it seemed like heaven to her, for he was telling her of his love—his disappointment at her sudden departure, which he looked upon as a rebuff, and of the bright hopes that he could scarcely believe real, though she had listened to him with so much patience. 'It was all like a dream—a sweet, bright dream,' she said, 'but real, beautifully real, though she never could believe it, never!'

"It was pleasant to hear her talk so gently of her love, and to see the color come and go in her face with every look I gave it. I do believe that day she was the

happiest creature on earth. She exclaimed at the beauty of every thing—the old apple trees with their scraggy branches, the patches of moss on the wayside, and the sunset. 'It certainly was,' she said, 'the most heavenly sunset that ever she saw in her life.'

"To me now it was a bank of yellow and red clouds piled up and heaped against each other, with streaks of purple and flame color breaking through; but she saw a thousand other bright things, as people who love poetry and dream dreams are sure to do.

"I told the old folks of the news, and Sarah told Hetty, who chirked up like a bird for two or three days, and hovered around her sister in a quiet flutter of happiness, like a robin when its mate is on the nest.

"The old gentleman took every thing that came in his way as a matter of course. Nothing could arouse his pride, for he held things that turn the heads of most people at their due worth.

"'Bentley is an honest man,' he said, 'and Sarah is a good, bright gal: they'll make a couple that we needn't be ashamed of, Dan—you may be sure of that.'

"I was satisfied. When my father pronounced any one an honest man, praise had no higher term for him. His pride of integrity was wonderful: he acknowledged no superiority but that of goodness and industry. There, he was unyielding: a want of integrity the old man never could forgive. I think that an absolutely wrong act in one of his family would have broken his heart. He was the proudest man I ever saw, and the meekest too.

"His children all knew this, and respected him accordingly. My sisters, above all, had great reverence for this trait of character, and dreaded his disapprobation above all things. Observe me, father was not a cross

nor severe man—only a downright honest one, whose good character was the life of his life.

"Of course a man like this could rejoice in his daughter's prosperity in marrying a man so much above your father, for he knew the full value of property, and was glad to get it in the family; but it was the intelligence and sterling goodness of Mr. Bentley that touched the old man nearest. Had these been wanting, property and position would have gone for nothing with a man of your grandfather's stamp.

"Well, the time came. Bentley asked the old man's consent in person, and with a few kind, hearty words was taken into the family.

"Sarah was very happy then. For days and days she was beautiful—so beautiful that I would stop to look at her. With a creature so smart and full of feeling, happiness was beauty, and it shone through her face like light through a lamp. In truth, I have seen a great many prettier women than our Sarah, but never one whose look would bring the heart into your mouth with such a throb of warm feeling. So she was happy as the day was long till after the wedding-day was set. Then I saw that she began to pine a little; once I found her in Hetty's room, and they were both crying. But this was natural enough, you know: the two gals had never been separated in their lives, and it was hard to give each other up.

CHAPTER XI.

END OF UNCLE DANIEL'S STORY.

"WELL, they were married at last, in the spring time, when the apple trees were all in bloom, and the young leaves coming out in the woods. There was no wedding to speak of, for Sarah, who was always so full of life and loved company more than any thing, insisted on being married almost alone, with no one but the family by. This surprised us all and made a good deal of hard talk in the neighborhood, for all her old mates insisted on it that Sarah was putting on airs, because her lover was a city gentleman and rich. There was no truth in this, for instead of putting on airs the dear gal appeared to grow more and more humble as the day came on, and it seemed as if the saddest part of her life was just before she married a man that I am sure she loved better than all the world beside.

"Hetty, too, did nothing but cry—not that this was done before folks, but you could see it in her heavy eyes and heavy step too. Poor gal, she really seemed afraid of Mr. Bentley, and would turn away from him sometimes with a scared look that no one could account for, for he was gentle and pleasant as could be to us all.

"Well, as I said before, they were married one spring morning, with the sunshine all around them, and the breath of the apple blossoms coming in at the window. There was no bridesmaid, for Hetty would not stand up

in spite of all we could say; and, except my little wife, she was the only young person there.

"That was one of Sarah's beautiful mornings—I mean as regards herself. She had thrown off all down-heartedness, and came down-stairs in her white muslin dress, that floated around her like a cloud, looking more like the angels we see in pictures than any thing else. She had a little cluster of crab-apple blossoms in her bosom, and a wreath of elder flowers and cherry blossoms around her head. She was handsome—yes, Gillian, I think she was almost as handsome as you are now, on the day of her wedding.

"It's one of the pleasantest things in life to see a bright, wholesome girl like her, brimming over with life, and with a will that no force could control, tamed down by love, with those soft shadows under her eyes, and the eyes themselves full of mist. I never loved my sister half so much as I did on that day. When she turned from the minister, and looked up to him with those eyes so mournful and tender the bridegroom kissed her forehead. I did not wonder at it, for it seemed as if she had just risen from a sacrament-table, with the holy wine on her lips, which it would be wicked to touch.

"I think Hetty felt like this, for when the bride went up to her and reached out her arms with a smile, I shall never forget how the poor gal clung around her with both arms, and kissed her neck, her dress, and her hands with a deep burst of crying; but when Sarah would have kissed her sister's lips she shrunk away trembling all over, and sobbing out blessings on her dear, dear sister, to which the old man answered amen, as if he had been in meeting.

"After this, Hetty and the bride went up-stairs together, and stayed a long time. When Sarah came down in her

travelling-dress, ready to leave us forever, Hetty stayed behind, and we did not see her again that day.

"As Mr. Bentley's carriage was driving away, Sarah looked back so longingly to the old house that I beckoned the driver to stop, and went up to say good-by once more.

"'Dan,' says she, as I came up, 'Dan, that's a good brother, bring me a handful of lilacs and some snow-balls, from the old bushes, under Hetty's window: they will be something to remind me of home.'

"Mr. Bentley was ready to spring out and gather them for her. But she said, with one of her smiles that was worth a sermon any day,

"'No—no, let Dan bring them now; and you shall gather flowers for me all the rest of our two lives.'

"I brought the lilacs and the snow-balls, and she gathered them up so lovingly in her hands, it made my heart swell, I can tell you.

"He drove away slowly at first, for Sarah kept looking back toward the house, and we all stood in the porch sending blessings after her—old-fashioned, honest blessings that followed her to the grave I am certain. But as they came near the hill, where the bridegroom had almost lost his life, and his poor cousin was brought away a corpse, the driver whipped up his horses, and they swept over the precipice like lightning, and in that spot we lost sight of them.

"After this we were very lonesome at the homestead. Sarah wrote long letters to us from her grand house in the city; but we missed her dreadfully. Sometimes a little private letter to Hetty came in the larger one, but we never knew what was in it: some secret always rested between the two.

"Once, in the first year, Hetty went down to York, but

she stayed at Aunt Mary's, only going now and then to see her sister.

"When we asked the reason of this, Hetty said that Sarah had so much company, and lived in such a grand way, that she felt out of place there. Sarah was just the same kind-hearted, noble creature, but Hetty was more comfortable with Aunt Mary.

"I have little more to tell you, Gillian, about your mother; for, with the exception of one or two visits to New York, when I put up at her house, and found myself as welcome as a robin in the spring, we saw little of each other. The old gentleman went to see her—that was after you were born—and came home delighted.

"At last, when you were a little more than two years old, Sarah and her husband came to the homestead again."

"Yes," said Gillian, who had listened to this long story with deep attention, "yes, I remember that, and I remember how she looked. It seems like a picture—the old place and all. But where did my parents go after that?"

"They went to Europe not three months from that time. It was a sudden thing, I am sure, for the mail that brought us this letter brought also a paper, in which we found that they had sailed. The old man felt a little hurt at this, I think, for he was getting so infirm and childish that any thing like neglect from those he loved wounded him. Not long after this he died, and mother followed him in three days, as old folks are apt to do. So they never lived to be disappointed by not receiving but one letter from sister Sarah, after she sailed for foreign parts; or to grieve over the news of her death, when it came to us, as if we had been strangers, in an open newspaper."

"And this is all you know about my poor mother?" said Gillian, painfully disappointed. "It is a great deal, certainly, but not all I expected. Papa so seldom speaks of her; and after that one evening, in this same old homestead, I remember nothing, for it seems they put me in a convent-school directly after we reached Italy, and when I came out my mother lay in the Campo Sante at Naples."

"Have you seen her grave, niece Gillian?" inquired the farmer

"Yes, my Italian servant—one who had been hired in the family when we first went to Italy—often took me to one of those heavenly flower-nooks in which the people of Naples lay their dead to sleep, and told me that my mother was buried beneath the roses there."

"And you read the tombstone?"

"A cross of marble—nothing more; but that was so like my father: you know he never could endure to register his joy or grief before the world. This is all I know of my mother's death."

"It is strange," said Uncle Daniel, thoughtfully, "but your father will not talk of her?"

Gillian answered, with tender sadness,

"Oh, that is like him too, dear, sensitive papa! I have often heard him say that a human soul never dies, and should only be spoken of as something too sacred for every-day speech."

Daniel Hart sank down in his chair and heaved a deep sigh. Up to this time a vague hope that his sister might have left some loving message for him had unconsciously floated through his mind.

"Still," said the good man, "still I will ask him more about her in the morning."

Gillian shook her head. "I think if there is any thing that

will give you pleasure, he will speak of his own accord," she said; "if not, the idea that he has inspired such a hope will give him pain. Let us wait, dear uncle."

Uncle Daniel gave up his hope with another profound sigh; and Gillian arose from her stool at his feet, saddened, as if she too had partaken of a wish that was destroyed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NIGHT VISIT OF AUNT HETTY.

GILLIAN stole softly up to her room, for, in a strange house, and with darkness all around, she grew timid, and was glad to cover herself up in bed. But she could not sleep. This conversation about her mother, the strangeness of every thing around, kept her wakeful and restless.

Her bed stood opposite a window which looked into the orchard where her mother had played when a child. The mellow autumn-moon had risen, and she could almost discern the apples as they fell over-ripe from the boughs, disturbing a stillness otherwise profound.

As she lay thus, dreamy and sad, a noise at the door startled her. At first she rose from the pillow, and looked keenly that way; but sank down on the instant, as almost any girl would have done, huddling the clothes about her head.

The door opened very softly, and a small figure, clad in white, stole across the floor, with her head bent forward, as if listening at each step. As the figure came opposite the window, Gillian, who, fascinated even in her terror,

had drawn the sheet from over her eyes, saw the features of Aunt Hetty, who came toward her like a shadow, evidently afraid of her own breath.

Curiosity overcame all fear in Gillian, who lay still, with her eyes half closed, watching her strange visitor. Aunt Hetty came close up to the bed, sunk on her knees, and seemed to be searching for a clear view of Gillian's face, which was a little in shadow eveu if it had been uncovered.

At last she put her hand softly down, drew away the counterpane, and a kiss fell on Gillian's forehead, so light and tremulous that it seemed but a shadow passing over her.

Gillian closed her eyes, for there was something in this act that brought dew into them, and with great difficulty she suppressed an unequal breath. Then, emboldened by her first effort, Aunt Hetty bent down and pored over that young face till a heavy tear fell upon it.

Unconsciously Gillian started, and shrinking together as if she had committed some crime, Aunt Hetty slid down to her knees, and burying her face in the bedclothes, waited.

But Gillian controlled herself, and directly sobs came at slow intervals from the bed; then the whispered words of a prayer; and after that wild, uncontrolled bursts of anguish, in which Gillian heard her mother's name repeated over and over again.

At last this sorrow seemed to wear itself out, and exhausted its force in faint sobs, ending in profound silence. After a little, Gillian felt that her aunt was sitting on the bed again, striving to search out the lineaments of her face in the shadows. The restraint became painful, and at last the young girl opened her eyes, meeting the mournful gaze of her aunt, upon which the moon shone brightly.

Aunt Hetty did not move; but her eyes wavered like those of a person suddenly detected in a crime.

"Aunt Hetty!" said Gillian, very softly, "Aunt Hetty!"

Her little hand stole out of the bed-clothes and touched that which lay helplessly on her pillow. There was something in that gentle voice, and the clasp of those fingers, that soothed the timid woman. Her fingers closed over Gillian's, and though she trembled, it seemed with kindly feeling.

"Aunt Hetty," repeated the young girl, "did not my mother come in this way to my bed one night, and you with her, when I was a little child?"

"And you remember her? You remember that noble, noble mother, and that night when we two prayed over you for the last time on earth?" she answered, in a whisper full of tender regrets.

"As I remember dreams—dreams of angels hovering near me," said Gillian. "Your coming to-night made it a reality."

"And she is dead—gone from us without a word of farewell—a word of—ah! my child, if you could but remember any word, any little thing by which I might know she thought of us with the old kindness!"

"How I wish so, too, dear aunt; but it is impossible. They took me from her so early: and, in the convent, I had so much kindness, that it made me forget easily. I remember there was one lady there, a boarder, who came to my cell every night, as you are here now, with a thousand gentle words and sweet kindnesses, and then the convent was so pleasant; that was when I was about five years old. She did not stay at the convent altogether; but came with other sisters of charity; sometimes staying a few weeks; sometimes three or four months."

"And this lady was kind to you? God bless her for that!" said Aunt Hetty, quietly. "If it would benefit her, I would give an hour of my life for every consoling word she said to you."

"Oh, yes," said Gillian, reflectively, "it was a sweet voice, motherly and soft—sweeter than any I ever heard in the convent. I wonder what became of her?"

The young girl sighed as she spoke; while Aunt Hetty tightened her clasp on the little hand.

"I have heard of sisters of charity: they must be happy woman, and good ones too, let them belong to what church they will," said Aunt Hetty. "Perhaps this lady is one of them still: for they travel about, I am told. I am not sweet-toned, as you say she was; but, if you will not think it strange for me to come into your room now and then, I should be very thankful. Your mother and I slept in each other's arms till she was more than your age. I have grown old and lonely since then—no one cares for my love; but, if you would not feel it a burden, there are some things that I might do in a quiet way. Don't you think so?"

She looked down into Gillian's face with wistful earnestness as she spoke; and the young girl, lonely in her half orphanage, and searching for affection everywhere, rose up, and threw her arms around that drooping neck with a fervor that brought fresh tears into Aunt Hetty's voice.

"Don't mind if I seem silent and stiff before folks," she said, folding the young girl close in her arms: "it is my way; but if I can save you one pain by laying down my life, speak, and I'll do it."

Before Gillian could answer as her warm heart dictated, the arms that had so closely embraced her fell away, and

her aunt glided from the chamber, shadow-like, as she had entered.

And this was Gillian's first night under the maternal roof. Perhaps the first deep feelings that she had ever experienced sprang into existence during those few hours. It seemed as if her father, too, was haunted with unrest; for, all night long, his step was heard by the master of the house, who slept beneath his room, walking to and fro.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE GILDED TEMPTATION.

A SUIT of rooms formed a gorgeous vista of subdued carpet, frescoed walls, ceilings from which the glowing flowers seemed ready to drop in masses, and tall windows muffled with draperies, upon which floods of light that fell from brackets and chandeliers turned wine-colored, and seemed to eddy and flow and ripple downward through the silken folds. Upon the walls great mirrors gleamed, like lakes margined with gold and buried in foliage, some in shadow giving out cool reflections, others throwing back light like a crystal pool in the sunshine.

Those panels which were not occupied by mirrors glowed with pictures, through which Bacchus reeled under his coronal of grape leaves; and Venus appeared, over and over again, smiling at his feet, or, with her white hands, crushing the purple clusters into his reeking wine-cup. Such gods and goddesses as Rubens loved to humanize into coarse beauty, laughed and reeled through these pictures; and though women never entered those

apartments day or night, you could not turn without meeting some bewitching glance, or beckoning attitude, which disturbed you with an idea of their actual presence. Indeed this luxurious mockery of life fell upon you like enchantment. It was like living over the most splendid scenes of a classic romance; but to the true man there was something repulsive in it all—a feeling that the moral atmosphere was unwholesome, as if sighs and unheard curses floated still among the rich draperies and sensuous pictures.

That keen intuition, which is the essence of our natural senses, till they become demoralized and coarse like an over-ripe flower, was sufficient to warn any good man that evil associations lurked everywhere around him. But few good men ever entered that building. The clink of gold, the rustle of bank notes, and the low hum of conversation which filled these rooms through the night hours, had little in them calculated to draw the honorable and true into that haunt.

The rooms were full of company, for play ran high that night. There was little noise and no appearance of confusion: the excitement was too intense for that. But the hush of restrained passions is sometimes more striking than their outbreak. An abrupt exclamation now and then, the hiss of a breath suddenly drawn in, and the sharp glitter of an eye fiercely uplifted from the cards, alone gave evidence of the contest in reality raging through these rooms.

In the most distant apartment from the entrance a table was laid, glittering with silver engraved with the delicacy of ice jewelry, and glass that seemed cut from the ice itself.

Forced fruits gleamed richly through this frost-work

of silver; and the glass, amber-hued and ruby-tinted by rare wines that filled it, mingled in one luxurious picture. But the whole was tamed down by the chandelier above, whose shades absorbed the light like great pearls and gave it forth in moonbeams.

It was beyond the usual hour of supper, but those around the card-table were so intensely occupied, that they forgot the hour, and even persons who were evidently but lookers-on became so interested in the play that a furtive glance was all they could bestow on the dimly lighted table beyond.

Down one side of these rooms ran what appeared to be rows of windows, all closely curtained with crimson damask which swept the carpet. But these draperies concealed the entrance to a series of lateral apartments, where the more respectable frequenters of the house made up select parties, and trod for themselves a more aristocratic road-to-ruin than those who appeared openly in the outer room.

Among the group that surrounded the faro-table was a young man who had been quietly but desperately betting for the last hour. He was a tall, handsome fellow, whose presence struck you, at first sight, with a resistless idea not only of great personal beauty but of corresponding intellect. Dark-brown hair, with a wave running through it; large, gray eyes, black under excitement, and a fresh, pure complexion, were by no means the first things that struck you in his appearance, for these are common advantages that we often meet without notice; but his figure, tall and lithe, the repose almost sullen of his manner, conspired to excite nearly as much distrust as admiration. The expression of his face, and the self-

sufficient repose of his bearing, were points that riveted the attention which his fine person invited.

He had lost heavily, ruinously perhaps, but the wild anguish which might have been looked for in a face so youthful failed to excite sympathy; a dead, sullen cloud settled on his face, and, with his eyes bent to the floor, he turned from the table, moving slowly down the room.

All at once a stinging sense of his position seemed to seize upon him; for, putting one hand into his bosom where some weapon was evidently concealed, he turned abruptly aside, lifted one of the crimson curtains, and stood panting in the recess separated from the large gambling-hall by the silken drapery and a smaller room, by a door through which faint sounds reached his ear, though at the moment they did not arrest his attention. After a moment the young man conquered his agitation, and drew his hand slowly from his bosom, muttering doggedly,

"What a fool! Kill myself here? Disgrace! Well, what of it? My name dishonored—who cares? Where did it come from? Who would feel the shame? Arrest—oh, there lies the danger!"

He lifted a hand distractedly to his forehead, as the last unpleasant idea forced itself on his conviction, and his limbs began to tremble. The gloom of a State's prison hovered over him. As he stood thus, a voice reached him from the hall; for some of the tables had broken up and their occupants were passing towards the supper-room. A group of two or three persons halted near the recess, and, supposing that he had left the establishment, were discussing his misfortunes.

"The son of a millionaire!" said one. "Nothing of the sort—confidential clerk in the house of N. L. & Co.,

with a salary which his losses to-night will not more than cover, if the money was really his own."

"A splendid young rascal, any way," answered another careless voice, "and sure to come up with a sharp turn if the heads of his firm get hold of this night's business."

"Which they will, sooner or later, even if it is not their cash he has been hazarding."

"Then heaven help him, for the old fellows will have no mercy. They belong to the benevolent evangelical order, and believe in capital punishment, strict justice and all that—never saw the inside of a place like this, and would be shocked to look upon the outer walls. But who is the young fellow? He didn't plank his money like a novice. His courage ought to have provoked better luck. What is his name? and who are his parents?"

"His name is Hurst—John, Richard, or William, I have no idea which it is; as for his family, if he ever had any I am ignorant of the fact. He lives with an old lady, some aunt, or cousin, across town, whom his salary ought to support, for she has been more than a mother to him, and her means are scanty enough."

"But he seems well educated."

"Like a prince. The poor old soul did more than educate him for his present calling; he graduated with first-class honors, not a year ago."

"He does not seem more than one-and-twenty, now."

"Not so old. Late hours, and this sort of thing has dashed all the freshness from his youth; but he is only a boy yet."

The group passed on, and, strange to say, the last words affected the young man behind the curtains more than any that had gone before.

"Only a boy!" he repeated, bitterly. "I'll let them see! Fools, is this night's work that of a boy?"

After this he listened keenly, hoping to discover that the inmates of the hall had been tempted off to the supper-room, when he could withdraw unseen; but, as he bent his head in the stillness, voices reached him, not from the hall, but through the door opening from the recess.

He started, drew himself up with a quick movement, and, slowly bending his head again, listened without a gesture or a breath.

No words were discernible through the thick doors, but the tones of a voice reached him, and the possibility of it belonging to one person inspired him with a desperate joy. Slowly and softly he unclosed the door, and left nothing but a frame covered with green baize between him and the room beyond; a very faint glimmer of light flickered through the baize, but it was impossible to see more than that, though the voices were now distinct.

The young man trembled with impatience. Quick as lightning his intellect grasped the means of safety that lay in that voice, should it prove the one he hoped. He dared not open the door, but softly drawing a small poignard from his bosom, he held the sheath in his mouth, as if to prevent his breath escaping with the slightest sound, and cut a small slit in the baize, through which it was possible to see all that passed in the chamber beyond.

An exclamation almost escaped him, for there, at a table, earnestly at play, sat the respectable head of his firm, the man in whose power his destiny was placed. For half an hour he crouched in that recess, watching the gray-haired gamblers at their midnight work; every word that fell from their lips was treasured—every gesture recorded in his memory.

At last the party broke up, and the four men prepared to depart after appointing a like meeting two nights from that, in which the sufferers were to claim revenge for their losses.

The party disappeared through some private door, which did not lead to the hall, and thus young Hurst obtained a secret of the establishment, which he felt sure of making available.

Now he was really excited; despair had made him sullen, but the hope born of this discovery, which promised both safety and revenge, brought a sparkling light to his eyes and changed his entire face. He waited a while, resolving this new state of things over in his mind, and at length, smiling with satisfaction, parted the curtains and stepped into the hall again.

As he had conjectured, most of the visitors were in the supper-room, and with his usual sauntering composure he turned that way.

"Give me wine," he said, reaching forth a glass; "I wish to drink a toast to a young lady who persecutes me with unpleasant attentions, especially to-night."

A gentleman filled his glass, saying carelessly to those around him—

"Be quiet, will you, while Hurst toasts his lady-love?"

"Oh, ha! Hurst back again! pluck in that," cried half a dozen voices. "Now for the lady."

Hurst held up his glass to the light, smiling with supercilious foppery on the wine, as one might be expected to smile who could utter a lady's name in such company.

"Come—come."

"I drink," he said, lifting his glass with a mischievous twinkle of the eye, "to Miss Fortune, the coquette, and shall be very glad to turn her over to any of you gentle-

men at a moment's warning. One flirtation is enough for me."

A laugh went round the table, for there was a raciness and dash about the young fellow that made even second-hand wit acceptable. Indeed the whole company were lost in admiration of the wonderful self-possession that marked his behavior. Among all that company he seemed the most free from care or self-reproach.

"The boy will shoot himself before morning," whispered one of the men who had made his losses a subject of conversation near the recess. "This is recklessness—not philosophy."

"I think not," was the reply. "See how steady his hand is, how cheerfully his lip curves. I tell you the fellow takes it coolly: an old stager of sixty could not carry off his misfortunes more bravely. Look at him now."

"A splendid animal, isn't he? By Jove, if I had that figure, it should command an heiress with any amount of rocks."

"But that sort of speculation has so many unpleasant incumbrances," was the reply, "especially in a State where women hold their own property, and divorces are next to impossible; the laws have almost ruined that sort of thing. But if you have finished that bird, let's follow the youngster. He interests me."

The two men arose, and followed Hurst down the room; he knew them slightly, and paused as they came up. One was an elderly man, bald, and sleek of face, with a shrewd eye, and gentle manner. The other appeared somewhat under thirty, and prided himself on being not only a man of the world, but a man of the peculiar world assembled in those rooms.

"Do you make an effort to retrieve?" said the elder, pointing to the faro-table.

"Not to-night," answered Hurst, smiling. "You remember my toast. One does not get rid of a lady-love so easily; besides, I am sleepy. Good-evening, gentlemen."

With a bow and a slight wave of the hand, Hurst passed on down the room and away, leaving the two gamblers looking at each other, half amused half disdainful.

"He's a trump!" said the younger.

"Young America!" sneered the elder, in his silky way. "The boys are crowding us out everywhere."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE AUTHORESS AT HOME.

A LITTLE out from New York, on that side of the Bloomingdale road which commands a picturesque view of the Hudson, within sound of the city, and yet not exactly in it, stood a pretty cottage. It was back from the road, and so near the river that, in the morning, a portion of its shadow fell upon the water. It was almost concealed from the road by a growth of old forest trees. The river bank was broken and rocky, affording pretty hollows, where the ferns grew thriftily, and flat ledges, on which the moss lay like a carpet. The cottage had once been a farm-house, but judicious improvements had recently transfigured it into a picturesque home, unlike any dwell-

ing within view. A porch thrown out in one direction, a bay window here, a balcony there, and clinging roses and vines wreathing all into harmony, made the house neither cottage, farm-house nor villa, but a most desirable residence, for all that. The house was a type of nothing but itself; or, it may be, of the person who inhabited it.

She was a woman of middle-age—an earnest, active woman, full of energy, rich in feeling, and endowed with a rare intellect, which had, at the time she presents herself in this narrative, won for her commanding influence, and a wide reputation. This influence sometimes bore heavily upon herself, from the duties of charity or social kindness which it imposed; and the reputation, brilliant as it was, she scarcely felt, so gradual had been its growth, and so little had she sought for it as a result of her labors.

This woman was an author. Not a mere literary lady capable of little snatches of song and pretty trifles, that live and die in the world of letters like wild flowers in a wood; but a maker of books, a worker-out of thought in its grandest and most beautiful form. She was, at once, a poet, a prose writer, an artist in soul, and a woman of society.

The room in which she sat opened upon the river, which flowed pleasantly on in full view of the broad window before which her writing-table was placed. Book-cases, crowded with volumes, covered every available part of the room. A marble head or two looked calmly down upon her as she wrote; and the picture of an old man, that hung over the mantle-piece, seemed to watch her with grave interest as if he alone knew the history of her life and intended to guard the secret.

There was none of the frippery, with which female

writers in their callow days love to surround themselves, in that room. Julia Ransom had got far beyond all that in her ascent up the hill of life. Two or three substantial easy-chairs, cushioned with embroidery wrought by the female friends who loved her, stood about. A footstool to match, from which the roses were worn out by the constant pressure of her slipper, stood near a table covered with crimson, and littered with pens, paper, books and pencils, with a bronze ink-stand after the model which Ariosto left. These objects, with a crimson couch, on which she sometimes rested after the excitement of hard writing, were sufficiently feminine in their appointments, without misleading you as to the character of their owner.

Julia Ransom was alone and writing, for it was the morning hour, and she usually commenced early and wrote late till her task was done, throwing her whole being into the event she narrated, or the pictures that she drew. Had you spoken to her, at such times, she probably would not have heard you, save to be slightly annoyed by the sound. Had she answered you, the words would have escaped her lips unconsciously, and she might have given you all she possessed on earth without knowing it. Once fastened upon a train of thought, it seemed impossible to wrench her mind away, and from this arose the vigor and intensity which marked all that she wrote.

Yet Julia Ransom never seemed alone, for the old man over the mantle-piece was like a guardian to her always. She would sometimes lift her face from the half-written sheet, and look upon the old man with smiling lips and an earnest expression of the eyes, which it seemed as if the very canvas must recognize and answer back with sympathy. Then she would dash into her subject again, and sheet after sheet left her hands, till she grew pale

with exhaustion, and drooped forward, with her arms folded on the table, gazing upon the river, too weary for exertion, yet unable to withdraw her mind from the drama it was creating.

She was sitting thus, with blank paper under her folded arms, and scattered manuscript lying at her feet, when the door softly opened, and a Madras kerchief, crowning a handsome, copper-colored face, was thrust through the opening.

Mrs. Ransom did not look up; so the handsome mulatto, to whom the kerchief and face belonged, stole softly across the room, and stood so as to throw her shadow across the paper on which her mistress was writing

Mrs. Ransom looked up, impatiently.

"Well, Ruby, what is it?" she said, beginning to write again.

"A lady—a young lady—came in an open carriage, white horses; boy behind with a cockade and band; colored driver, looks like a prince right from Africa."

"Who is the lady, Ruby?"

"Here's the card, Miss."

Mrs. Ransom leaned back in her chair, drew a hand across her forehead, and languidly received the card.

"Miss Gillian Bentley!"

She read the name over two or three times, drew her hand again and again across her eyes, then arose and went to the door.

"No," she said, hesitating, with her hand on the knob. "Let the young lady come to me here."

The girl went out, while Mrs. Ransom paced up and down the room two or three times, apparently annoyed by the intrusion of a stranger upon her occupation. She

was in the middle of the room, and stood, with her eyes on the door, when it opened to admit Gillian.

The young girl was a good deal embarrassed; for, the reputation of Mrs. Ransom, with a certain reserved shyness, which was neither pride nor bashfulness, had its effect on her frank nature: besides this, the lady did not advance, or smile, but stood, gazing on her with a long, wistful look, as if she had been the picture of some old friend.

At last Gillian stepped forward, blushing to the temples, and said, in a frank, childlike way,

"You were busy to-day, and I am intruding: pray let me retire."

"No! no!" Intrusion? no!" was the confused reply. "Be seated, here by the window. I am not busy—far from it."

Gillian sat down in a chair near the window. Mrs. Ransom took her old seat, and, for a little time, there was profound silence between them. The young girl looked out upon the river; the lady sat gazing on her.

"Indeed, I fear the visit is unpardonable," she said, at last, glancing at the lady.

"Did you speak? I beg your pardon; but—but really I am a little *distraite* this morning. You wished to see me—to ask some questions, perhaps. Have no reluctance: it is not an uncommon thing for me to receive strangers, especially those who have real or fancied sufferings. You do not seem of that class."

"No, no," said Gillian, "I have no sorrows to speak of; and, if I had, I should not bring them here, or anywhere else. It seems to me that griefs are sometimes heavenly gifts, and should only be shared with divinity."

Julia Ransom's face kindled up, and the color broke into

her face, which had, up to this time, been singularly pale.

"But would you withhold joys as well as griefs from friendly sympathy?" she said, with a smile that brought a glow into Gillian's face.

"No, indeed. Joy should be shared with every one like the sunshine and other bright things. I wish it were in my power to fill your world with it, lady, for your writings have made half the happiness I ever knew."

Julia smiled, oh, such a bright, glorious smile! Words like these, full of sincerity and truth, were a beautiful reward for her toil of thought.

"You like my books, then?" she said, gently.

"Like them? Oh, lady, if I had but words to tell you how much!"

Mrs. Ransom hesitated, smiled, and then, with a slight tremor of the lip, and some unnatural restraint, inquired if Gillian's parents also approved the books she had written.

The face of the young girl clouded painfully, and she answered that she had but one parent living—her father; and it was from him she had, at first, learned to love those books.

"He reads them—did you say?" asked Mrs. Ransom, in a low voice.

"Indeed he does. My father is a learned man, you must know, and his mind is given to research and science rather than what is called light reading; but he is fond of the classics, and sometimes takes up a modern novel for an hour. It was in this way he became interested in your writings. We were in Europe, and a translation fell in his way. The translation of an American book was a rare thing till lately, you know, and this fact drew his attention.

I think I never saw him so much interested in any thing as he was in those books. I never saw him cry but twice in my life, and once was while he was reading them. Indeed his eyes were dim with tears half the time. It was a strange thing to see him feel so deeply, especially where the subject was a fiction."

"The book which makes you feel deeply is never a fiction. It is the truth which appeals to any heart successfully, no matter in what form you disguise it," said Julia Ransom, with emotion.

"I am sure of that," answered Gillian, who was becoming more and more interested in the lady. "It seems to me impossible that there should be no deep emotion in the heart of a writer who can draw tears from the souls of those who read. I should have no respect for the author who could excite feelings she did not herself know."

"No author can excite feelings which she does not herself know, either through experience or the imagination," answered Mrs. Ransom, earnestly.

"This was exactly what my father said!"

Mrs. Ransom did not answer, but arose and walked to the window. Then she turned with one of her bright smiles, and laid her hand on Gillian's head. It was a beautiful picture—that noble woman, with her face eloquent of some grand but unexplained feeling; and the blushing girl, who lifted her eyes, with an expression so gentle and pleased, to meet the glance which fell lovingly upon her.

"You do not seem like a stranger to me, dear lady," said Gillian, as the hand glided softly adown her tresses; "but then, to whom could you be a stranger? I was afraid of being disappointed—everybody said it must be so—but—but——"

She stopped suddenly, and her eyes filled; for the lady stooped down and kissed her on the forehead, so fervently that it left a crimson flush behind.

Gillian started up with a quick impulse, attempted to throw her arms round the lady's neck, but dropped them again, blushing, and frightened at her own familiarity. But the lady reached forth her arms and drew the fair girl to her bosom, murmuring soft words over her, which Gillian could never remember afterward without a swell of the heart, though their exact import never reached her.

"I have written to you so often, dreamed of you, thought of you. Oh, I wonder if every one worships genius as I worship it in you!"

Gillian laid her head tenderly down on the lady's shoulder as she spoke; and Mrs. Ransom smoothed her hair while she smiled upon her.

"Then you have written to me?"

"Yes, so often, and you have answered me too. It is now six months since I first ventured on a letter. I was sad, very sad then; for we had just come to the country, and some things that were told me about my family made me thoughtful. Besides, I am full of wild fancies, and so must put them into poetry. I dared not show them to my father, or any one, but sent them to you under a feigned name. You liked the poetry and the letters a little, I suppose, for your answers were very kind, and so I came."

"Thank you, love! a thousand times thank you! So it was you sent those letters, and the poetry. It was a pleasant introduction," said Mrs. Ransom. "I have little time for letter-writing, but yours were so natural, and frank, that I could not help answering them."

"I was determined to know you in some way," said Gillian, with a childlike laugh. "With no mother or

sister, I sometimes feel very lonely. The society here seems strange, and I long for some one to love: not a young girl like myself, but a woman, older, wiser and more kindly than girls are to each other. Oh, lady, you would pity me if you knew how I sometimes want a mother!"

Mrs. Ransom's face changed. Some gloomy thought seemed to force all the cheerfulness out of it. She held Gillian close to her bosom, which scarcely appeared to throb with a breath.

"Oh, if I only had a child like you! but it can never be. I am a lonely woman, chastened, irritable at times; a daughter's love would be heaven to me; but I am used to living without affection."

"You, lady? oh!"

Mrs. Ransom smiled a sweet, piteous smile, that brought the tears into Gillian's eyes.

"Except from the poor that I can serve, and the friends who never thoroughly know one."

"But, lady, you have so many friends. It seems as if you must be so happy. Success, reputation, the greatest of all blessings—a free expression of thought."

"You misunderstand," answered the lady, with a grave smile. "I did not speak of myself as absolutely unhappy, but childless, without family ties, and very lonely at times. But even outside the affections life has a great many pleasures, which no one is warranted in casting away because he or she cannot grasp every thing. It is something to give happiness—to have earned the power of conferring it. There is absolute pleasure in labor, be it of thought or action. Do not think, young lady, that I complain or imagine misery poetical—far from it: grief is frequently more selfish than joy. When I say that one blessing is denied to me, that of kindred and household affections, it

is but to share the fate of hundreds more worthy than myself, who, perhaps, have not so many resources of happiness as I posesss. It must be a gloomy nature, indeed, which cannot find in this beautiful world more sunshine than storm."

"But you, so affectionate, so warm-hearted, to exist without a return of affection, that seems to me impossible; it is starving the heart!"

"No, it is only withholding its most exquisite nutriment. There is enough that is wholesome and good left, on which an earnest nature can live, and thrive, too," said Mrs. Ransom, with one of those noble expressions that bespoke so much earnestness. "Duties have their value as well as feelings; thought is rich with pleasure when properly exercised. Believe me, child, it is far better to be useful and good than to be happy."

"But I so hoped and wished to find you happy!"

"And so I am," answered the lady, with a low sigh. "Remember this is but the beginning of eternity with us: the first rudiments of any thing are sure to be acquired with mistakes and difficulties; but time and effort conquers all things. If our first lessons in life are full of disappointments, the future is before us in which they can be turned into blessings, if not in this life, in that to which we go."

The solemnity and gentleness with which all this was said touched Gillian profoundly. It reminded her of many conversations she had held with her father: the same sweet pathos was there, the same proof of deep thought.

"This is so like my father's," she said, lifting her earnest eyes to the noble face bending over her. "Oh, how I wish you knew my father!"

The features on which she gazed broke into a smile of

unspeakable tenderness: but the lady made no answer. She sat gazing into Gillian's face with a look so wistful and sad, that the young girl bowed her head and began to weep.

"Forgive me," she said, shaking the tears away, and laughing like an April morning. "I am always fancying strange things—and that moment it seemed as if we had been acquainted thousands of years."

"Be careful how you indulge in wild thoughts like these," said the lady, with a gentle shake of the head.

Gillian colored and looked distressed. It was seldom that even the most gentle rebuke was extended to her, and she scarcely knew how to receive even this delicate caution. But when Mrs. Ransom smiled again, it was apology enough.

Gillian arose to go, but, as she stood with her hand in the lady's clasp, the door was again opened, and the mulatto glided in.

"Mr. Hurst," she began to say; but that instant the young man, whom we saw last in the gambling-saloon, came hurriedly in, pushing the girl aside as he entered.

"My dear madam, what has come over Ruby? She insists on announcing me as if I were an ambassador."

Here he saw Gillian, gave a little start, and bowed profoundly.

"I beg pardon," he continued. "I see now what my impatience prevented her telling me. You are engaged."

"No, no," said Gillian, in her prompt way, "I was just going. Mrs. Ransom will forgive me for having stayed too long already."

The young girl turned her eyes on Mrs. Ransom, as she spoke, and saw that the lady had become suddenly pale,

that her eyes sparkled, and a strange excitement shook the hand she still clasped in her own.

Hurst smiled and drew near; his audacity was graceful, but not the less offensive to Mrs. Ransom for that.

"I shall never forgive myself, if I drive so much beauty away by this rude intrusion," he said, covering Gillian with his bold glance of admiration.

Mrs. Ransom started; her eyes flashed, and a frown swept her brows heavily. Gillian was terrified by the haughty anger of that look; and Hurst drew a step back, evidently surprised by it.

Still grasping Gillian's hand, the lady led her from the room, sweeping by Hurst with the same angry look, and closing the door after them. But the moment they stood in the tiled pavement of the hall, her face changed suddenly, as you see a storm go off in summer.

"May I come and see you again?" whispered Gillian, rendered timid by the anger which had passed away.

"Does—does your father know of this visit?"

"Yes; I told him of my great wish to see you, and he consented."

"Then come again when you desire it. Often, very often, if you can learn to love me a little."

"I love you already," was the reply.

They parted in the hall, but instead of returning to the room where young Hurst was waiting, Mrs. Ransom stood by the door motionless as a statue, and gazed into the distance long after the carriage, which conveyed Gillian, disappeared in the winding road that led from her house. At last she was disturbed by a hand laid on her arm. Young Hurst had come from the study, impatient of her absence, and with his usual daring broke in upon her reverie.

She drew a deep breath, and turned toward him with a smile of ineffable happiness. But the moment her eyes met his the smile was gone, and she returned to the study with evident reluctance.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. RANSOM'S UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

As Mrs. Ransom entered the room with young Hurst, a faint shudder passed over her as if it was repulsive to find herself again in his presence.

Then her face softened as she looked toward him; some tender memory was evidently struggling at her heart, which, for a moment, asserted its supremacy over the displeasure which his appearance had at first caused her.

"Michael," she said, softly.

He turned toward her, and she made a movement to lay her hand caressingly upon his shoulder; but, looking in his face, she met the same smile which had so irritated her when she saw the young girl blushing beneath it

"Did you speak?" he asked.

"It is nothing," she replied, abruptly; "I had forgotten that it was you."

"What a glorious bird of paradise that was I frightened away!" he said. "I felt quite guilty at having startled her so."

Again Mrs. Ransom's face darkened with stern displeasure, and she replied coldly:

"I had given strict orders not to be disturbed: the young lady desired to see me alone."

"A thousand apologies for the intrusion, dear madam," he returned, with easy assurance, "but it never occurred to my mind that such a command could apply to me."

"I should prefer to think that some urgent business made you so unceremonious," said Mrs. Ransom, with severity. "Certainly the indulgence and kindness which I have shown you would be a poor reason for presuming to disobey my wishes."

Hurst bit his lip to keep back the angry retort which her words suggested. He knew her varying moods, and saw that she would permit neither trifling nor impertinence; and, as he had a favor to ask, he could not venture to irritate her.

"Forgive me, dear lady," he said, taking her hand respectfully and pressing it to his lips. "I believe I am a rather spoiled child, but you know well that for the world I would not offend you."

Mrs. Ransom quietly withdrew her hand, and the displeasure in her countenance gave way to an expression of sad thoughtfulness. She motioned the young man to be seated, and sank back in her own easy-chair, leaning her head upon her hand, while her eyes fastened themselves on the picture over the mantle-piece, earnestly as if she were asking counsel of the face that looked so kindly down upon her. She seemed to have forgotten the young man's presence, and, when he ventured at last to break the silence, looked wonderingly around as if surprised to find that she was not alone.

"Pray where did that splendid creature spring from, Mrs. Ransom? I do not remember having seen her here before."

"It is the first time she has ever visited me."

"I hope, at least, it will not be the last, for certainly she is one of the loveliest creatures I ever saw."

Mrs. Ransom looked annoyed; her foot began to tap the footstool impatiently, a habit she had when irritated or anxious.

"It is not probable that she will come again," she said.

"Then you do not know her?"

"I do not. She came, as many young girls do, from a desire to see a woman who has written books."

"But at least you know her name?"

"Really, Michael, your curiosity seems wonderfully excited. Might I be curious in turn, and ask what brings you here, this morning?"

"I had some business, I believe," he replied, with a gay laugh; "but to tell you the truth, the sight of so much loveliness has quite driven it out of my head."

"Then you will not think me rude if I go on writing, while you try to recall your errand?"

"I see you are determined not to gratify what you are pleased to style my curiosity concerning your visitor."

"I am quite unable to imagine how you can be in the slightest degree interested in a perfect stranger, Michael."

"Do you think any man would not be bewildered by the sight of an angel like that?"

"You are growing poetical, young gentleman—something I never remarked in you before."

"Ah, now you are going to be satirical, and you know I never can answer your sarcasm."

Mrs. Ransom frowned impatiently and took up her pen.

"As I am somewhat hurried to-day, you must permit me to work. Whenever you have exhausted your rap-

tures, and can recollect your business, I will listen to you."

"I have troubled you so much of late, dear madam, that I am almost afraid to annoy you again."

"You know, Michael, that I am always glad to serve you, and I am never annoyed by listening to any thing in which you have really an interest."

"Then, perhaps, you will tell me the name of your visitor?" said Hurst, laughingly, and with one of those quick changes of manner peculiar to him.

"Your jesting is ill-timed," Mrs. Ransom replied, almost harshly. "If you indeed desire my advice, you have only to ask it; but I have no leisure for such trifling."

Hurst moved impatientiy in his chair, but did not venture a reply. The least opposition to his wishes was always sure to excite him; and in this sudden interest for the youthful stranger there was something beyond the momentary attraction of girlish loveliness. There was a vague suspicion in his mind, which he was burning to have resolved into certainty; but he knew Mrs. Ransom too well for any idea of venturing upon farther importunity for the moment.

She had fallen back in her former attitude of mournful meditation. One saw at a glance that it was no new grief which moved her, but some great sorrow which came out of the past, and had been her constant companion for years.

Hurst looked curiously at her. She was a singular study during such moments; and he was a man of sufficiently vivid imagination to weave in his mind innumerable wild fancies while watching her protracted revery.

At length Mrs. Ransom roused herself with an effort and turned toward him again.

"You must excuse me this morning," she said, with a troubled smile, "I really am not quite myself; I have been writing steadily for hours, and the exertion has left me strangely weary and absorbed."

"One might think that, after so many years of continued labor, writing would have become almost a mechanical effort," Hurst remarked.

"On the contrary, it seems to me that every year I write with more earnestness of purpose, throwing my whole soul into the task much more completely than during my youth, when authorship was a passion and not a power."

"Something more than mere fatigue seems to trouble you," he ventured to say.

"What else should?" she asked.

"Nothing that I know of. I thought possibly your visitor had brought you some unpleasant news."

"I have told you that she was an entire stranger to me."

"She might have resembled some one whom you knew formerly. We can never account for the fancies and reminiscences a strange face often arouses."

Mrs. Ransom looked up quickly, but the young man had averted his eyes. He was toying carelessly with one of the bronze ornaments upon her table, and seemed to have uttered the words with no thought beyond the moment.

"Your remark is sufficiently true," she replied, drawing a deep breath. "Very often the sight of a picture or a beautiful landscape will arouse the same feelings; they seem like places which we have seen before, and remember like objects in a dream, or some memory from a previous life."

"That young girl was lovely enough to have been the

reality of a poet's ideal. I have seldom seen such grace and beauty united with so much childish simplicity of thought and manner."

"She was indeed very lovely," Mrs. Ransom murmured, as if thinking aloud—"very, very lovely."

Hurst had led the conversation back to the visitor in the hope of discovering her name; but at that moment his eye fell upon a card which had fallen near his chair. He allowed his handkerchief to drop, and in stooping forward to pick it up managed to secrete the card among its folds. Quick as the action was, he found an opportunity to read the name,

"Miss Gillian Bentley."

He felt singularly irritated with Mrs. Ransom, and in his excitement all fear of offending left him

"I have an engagement in an hour," he said, "and must soon go."

"You appear to find a great deal of leisure time. I think your employers must be very kind to you."

Hurst's lip curled with a sneer. Mrs. Ransom's remark had evidently called up a new train of thought, but he said only,

"Business men are not given generally to such weakness. I have nothing to complain of, except the smallness of my means."

"Certainly, Michael, you have had no lack of money during the past year; I was quite startled yesterday at recalling the amount of your expenditures."

"You do not expect a young man to live like a hermit, I suppose," Hurst said, impatiently.

"Perhaps not; but I expect him to be just to himself and to those who feel an interest in him."

"I know of no one who has any interest in me."

"You are angry, Michael, and therefore I excuse your injustice."

"I am not angry, Mrs. Ransom, but I do not choose to be treated like a child—to have every wish thwarted—to be told that I have no right to enjoy life like others of my age."

"You have no right to be drawn into extravagances, the demands of which it is out of your power to meet; no man has a right to do that."

"You have told me all this, madam, many times before."

"Do not fear, Michael, that I shall repeat it. I have tried to be a good friend to you; I have had an interest in you for which you should at least be grateful, and surely when I see you leading a life that I know to be wrong I have a right to expostulate."

"I will allow no one to play the tyrant over me: my actions shall be unquestioned."

A withering retort trembled on Mrs. Ransom's lips, but she checked the impulse: she could not find it in her heart to reproach any one with her bounty, and she knew well that Hurst's only hope was in her.

"That is childish," she said, after a moment's pause; "a few years since such language could be tolerated, but you have grown too old now for it to be excusable."

Hurst struggled for self-command. At that moment he fairly hated the woman who had been his benefactress. He had that weak, false pride which made him rebel against receiving a favor, although he never hesitated to accept it—nay, even to claim it as his right.

"Tell me what brought you here this morning, Michael?" Mrs. Ransom said, more kindly; "you came on business: what was its nature?"

"I want money," he said, sullenly, "and I must have it from some source."

"More money? Have you forgotten how few weeks have elapsed since your debts were paid, and a large amount beyond placed in your hands?"

"Remind me of all I owe you!" he exclaimed, with reckless bitterness; "make me feel wholly base and degraded: I am at your mercy."

"Indeed I did not mean that; were you my own son I should say to you what I am now saying."

"Can you procure me the money I need?" he asked, bluntly.

"I shall give you none at present. If you have wasted the sum I put in your hands, not a month since, on condition that you would conduct yourself very differently, I cannot help it—I am powerless to aid you at present."

"That means you will not!" he cried angrily. "This is your boasted kindness; this is a proof of the interest you profess for me."

"You are rapidly wearing out all such feelings, Michael. Have a care! You heed no opposition, will listen to no counsel. Before long I shall cease to offer any; but when that time comes I shall have lost all interest in you."

"Let it come," he replied, defiantly, lifting his head and looking boldly in her face, while his eyes grew black and inflamed with anger. "Let it come! I want to feel that I am entirely alone in the world—no resource—no friend. Go on, Mrs. Ransom."

"Oh, boy, boy, how you wrong yourself and me! Have I deserved this?"

"Mrs. Ransom, I have no time to trifle. I must have money. My honor depends on that."

"You have been gambling again! No, Michael, I will not aid you. Six months ago I told you that I would never pay another gaming debt, and I will not."

"Then let me go. I must find it elsewhere!"

"Stop! Michael, you shall not leave my house in a mood like that! You must listen to me—I have a right to demand it."

"What right, madam? I admit no right that any one has over me."

"I could reply very bitterly, young man; it is not for your sake that I refrain! Still I have a right—my affection for you has given it to me; no parent ever watched over a son more faithfully than I have cared for you."

"Who were my parents?" he asked, abruptly; "where are they? why have I been left all my life to the mercy of strangers?"

Mrs. Ransom made no answer. In her excitement she had risen from her seat, and was standing directly before him. A strange pallor, which in moments of intense feeling troubled her face, swept over it then; her fine gray eyes, not beautiful at ordinary times, grew bright and dark, while her lips parted in a vain attempt to speak. Hurst was startled by her appearance; even through his reckless anger he saw that some subtle chord in her soul had been swept, and that her whole being vibrated to the rude touch.

"Mrs. Ransom!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, yes," she repeated, like one who has heard a voice from afar, and only sighs out a faint response from a vain effort to send an answer in return; "I hear you—go on."

"My parents," he said, "who were they?"

Mrs. Ransom shivered down into her seat—that is the only word which could express the movement—she seemed literally like one struck by a mortal chill that had slowly penetrated to her heart, closing its pulses in an icy grasp.

"Are they alive?" he questioned. "Why have you never spoken of them? Why am I left in the world friendless, an outcast? If I died to-morrow there would be no living soul to shed a tear over my grave. I have lived unloved and alone; I shall die unregretted and forgotten."

The wily man knew well the nature with which he had to deal; he knew how every fibre of her being responded to the least call for sympathy: yet it was not wholly art which caused his agitation; he was impulsive and excitable like all imaginative persons, and the question which he so eagerly propounded had often troubled his passionate soul. He felt no tender regret for those unknown parents, but the doubt and implied disgrace, which hung over him, had preyed for years upon his proud spirit; and perhaps a portion of his reckless conduct was to be attributed to the bitter feeling toward the whole world which had sprung from that terrible suspicion.

"Answer me, Mrs. Ransom. Do not torture me by this silence. Is my father living? Where is he? What is his name?"

Mrs. Ransom drew her hand slowly across her eyes, and again that agonized shudder passed over her frame.

"Your father is dead!" she gasped, "dead!"

"And my mother—is she living? Has she no kindly remembrance of the child upon whose unconscious lips she pressed a first tender kiss? Will she allow him to go through life without having once known a mother's fondness? Was she not human? Had she no feeling in common with the rest of her sex?"

"Hush! Michael, hush!" pleaded Mrs. Ransom, in a tone of deep anguish; "do not torture yourself and me by these wild questions."

"I have a right to ask them, lady; I will no longer be surrounded by this impenetrable mystery. Answer me, I beg."

"Of what avail? Why rouse memories of the past, Michael? You are raking the ashes from off a tomb. For your own sake leave the dead to rest in peace."

"Dead! Are they both dead?"

"Dead to you! demand no more! Learn to live in the present—forget these haunting doubts which can never be gratified. I warn you, Michael Hurst, that you are only preparing for yourself misery in the future, by this reckless determination to penetrate mysteries in which you have no share."

"No share, madam? Is it nothing that I have no family—no relatives? Must I sit quietly down in this disgraceful ignorance, and be patient beneath the ignominy which the sins of others have forced upon me?"

"Peace, young man!" exclaimed Mrs. Ransom, in a hoarse voice. "Do not dare to insult the memory of your parents!"

"What have they done for me that I should respect it? I owe them neither gratitude nor affection, and I will give none! Were I standing by my father's grave I would say the same! There must have been guilt somewhere, and I am left to suffer the consequences of wrongs in which I had no part."

"Yes, Michael, there was wrong, deep wrong; but it was not meant—before heaven I assert that!"

"At least I am forced to endure the consequences of that sin——"

"Who mentioned sin?" broke in Mrs. Ransom, with passionate excitement, strangely at variance with her usual calm demeanor.

"Is not wrong sin?" cried Hurst, angrily; "is not error sin?"

"No, no, a thousand times no! Stop, boy: you have reached a limit beyond which you shall not pass."

"Who shall prevent me? I fear nothing! Perhaps I am bold and unscrupulous; but with whom rests the fault?—not with me—I refuse to accept it."

Mrs. Ransom rose from her seat and paced slowly up and down, her hands locked together, and her eyes cast upon the floor, striving hard to regain her self-command. Suddenly she paused before the picture which hung above the mantle, and raised her eyes to the face that beamed so benignantly down upon her. She extended her arms in supplication, her lips moved in inaudible prayer. At length the anguish died out of her face—her eyes cleared—her lips softened into a faint smile that wandered over her features like a waning sunbeam. She turned back to the table and sat down, once more calm and self-possessed.

"We have wandered from our subject, Michael; let us return to your affairs. Tell me how it happens that you are again in difficulty—I wish to know all."

"I do not see why I should account to any human being for my actions."

"Then why have you come to me for counsel?"

"Because you have told me that you were my friend—because you have taught me to consider you as one to whom I could come with every trouble, every pain."

"Then at least do not insult me!"

"It is I who am insulted by your doubts and suspi-

cions," he replied, his passion again mastering his prudence.

"You certainly give me every reason for them by your reckless conduct. Stop, Michael!" she continued, in a warning voice, as he was about to answer more insolently than before. "I will not suffer you again to address me in such language. Remember, if I rebuke you, it is because these outbursts of anger on the slightest occasion, injure you more deeply than any effect your words can have upon my feelings."

"I will leave you, madam, if my presence is so distasteful to you."

"Do not go away with such feelings, Michael; I have faith enough in your goodness of heart to believe that you would repent having left me thus."

"It is useless for me to remain here—you have lost all interest in me."

"I have not lost it, Michael, but I confess that your conduct is rapidly wearing away my forbearance. I have borne much from you for reasons of which you knew nothing; but even that desire to perform faithfully a duty imposed on me long years since will not induce me to compromise my own dignity and self-respect."

"Mine are not to be considered; I am to submit to disgrace, and bear it with calmness—I tell you I will not do it! I must have a certain sum of money before night, and by some means have it I will."

"It is out of my power to assist you to-day, even if I were so inclined; your needs cannot be so urgent that a few days consideration will be more than a trifling inconvenience."

"Surely I must be the best judge of that! Have the money to-day I will."

"Then you must seek assistance elsewhere, for I have none to give."

"Good-morning, madam!" he exclaimed, rising and hastening toward the door. He paused, with his hand upon the knob, thinking that she would call him back, as she had often done when he left her in moments of anger; but the lady made no sign. She was leaning back in her chair with a sort of stony composure, which at times came over her, and did not even raise her eyes.

Hurst muttered an oath and dashed out of the room, closing the door violently behind him. When he had gained the street, he drew from his vest the card which he had secreted, and looked again at the name.

"Gillian Bentley," he said, almost aloud. "Yes, yes, I know the name; I see my way clearer now—it is a plot worthy of Machiavelli! Many thanks for that little scene at the gambling-house last night; the money was well lost which was the means of making that discovery."

He sauntered carelessly down the street, greeting any chance acquaintance with a pleasant smile or word, seemingly unoccupied beyond the idle thoughts of the moment, so frank and happy-looking that it appeared impossible it could be the same face which an hour before had been dark with evil passions.

Mrs. Ransom remained sitting where Hurst had left her. What a world of unquiet memories surged over her face during that season of self-communion! One might have half understood her whole life by looking at her then; she, usually so calm and gentle, full of tender sympathies for others, searching the bright side of life and turning resolutely away from the gloom, was now wan and spent beneath the harrowing reflections which started up before

her like mournful shapes, forcing themselves out of the mist of the past.

Once she raised her eyes to the portrait, murmuring—

"This is hard, hard to bear—give me strength, for I am without power and without hope."

So the day wore on in Julia Ransom's solitude, and amid all the friends that her genius had raised up for her, there was not one with power to comfort her during that sad reverie; and she, whose beautiful creations had brought so much happiness to others, was unable to find in her own grand soul a single gleam of consolation.

CHAPTER XVI.

SANCTIMONIOUS RESPECTABILITY.

THE room seemed to have been fitted up as a library, for the walls were filled with book-cases and the tables were covered with richly-bound volumes and the newest pamphlets. Still it was evidently the common working-room of a business man; for near one of the windows was a long writing-table surmounted by a cabinet, filled with large packages of papers and deeds.

Seated by the table was a tall, thin man, in whose features were those lines and furrows which long years of constant occupation will bring upon the face, with a serene moral composure which would have deceived even a keen-eyed man of the world.

But now in that solitude the calmness which a long life of dissimulation had given the countenance was gone, and

the undercurrent of passion showed through like a turbid bottom seen beneath smooth waters.

That man was Nathan Lawrence, a leading partner in the house where Michael Hurst found employment, and the person whom the young man had so unexpectedly seen at the gambling-hall upon the previous night.

He was sitting with paper before him and a pen in his hand, but he had not yet written a line, although it was full an hour since he had taken his seat there.

The events of the past evening had evidently left an impression upon him, which he could not readily shake off, for his losses had been large, even for one of his great wealth, and he might well pause to reflect upon the consequences of many nights of misfortune like that.

In the eyes of the world, Nathan Lawrence possessed the reputation of being a moral man—not religious, perhaps, in the strict sense of the word, but perfectly upright and conscientious. He was to be seen every Sunday in his seat in church, uttering the responses with the utmost fervor, and was always foremost in every public charity or philanthropic act which was sounded abroad. In short, he was a man who possessed the esteem of all who knew him; and when once or twice strange reports had gone abroad concerning him, the source of which no one could explain, they had been indignantly refuted by his large circle of acquaintance, and for a time he had risen almost to the dignity of a martyr from that attempted persecution.

In the business world no man's credit stood higher. He was the head of one of the most influential firms in the country, and his slightest word was considered equal to the bond of any common man.

This was the man whom young Hurst had discovered

at the gambling-house. Had he known that fact, with the desperate condition and daring character of the youth, Mr. Lawrence would scarcely have sat at that table with so much composure, dwelling only upon the sums which he had lost, for the reputation so falsely gained was dearer far to him than wealth or life itself.

While Mr. Lawrence sat gloomily absorbed in his library, a low knock sounded at the door, and a domestic entered the room, and paused before him with grave respect.

"What is it, Peters?" Mr. Lawrence asked, after a second's silence, laying down his pen, and seeming to rouse himself from some important calculation.

"There is a gentleman below who wishes to speak with you, sir."

"Did he give his name, Peters?"

"Mr. Hurst, sir."

"Hurst? What can he want? Did you tell him that I was occupied?"

"Yes, sir; but he said that he had just come from the counting-house, and wished to see you on some business of importance."

"Show him up, Peters, and remember I am at home to no one else."

The servant left the room, and Mr. Lawrence again took up his pen, but his hand shook, and he could not frame a letter, although his face looked cold and stern as before. The past night had left him strangely nervous; and simple as was the fact of his clerk calling upon him, he was startled by the sound of his name.

In a moment the servant again opened the door, and young Hurst entered with his usual air of careless composure.

Mr. Lawrence turned slowly round with his most dignified manner, and surveyed his clerk from head to foot.

"Good morning, Mr. Hurst," he said, with haughty blandness; "my servant said that you desired particularly to see me. Business from the office, I suppose?"

Hurst returned his glance without faltering, and replied with the familiar ease of an equal:

"Partially so, Mr. Lawrence, partially so."

The rich man looked at him in astonishment. It was the first time that one of his clerks had ever ventured to address him, save with profound respect, and he could not comprehend the singular assurance of this young man.

"I am very much occupied this morning," he said, with dignity; "let me hear your message at once."

"I have none, sir," replied Hurst, with the same unchanging assurance. "I always employ my servant in any thing of that sort."

"Mr. Hurst!" exclaimed the man of respectability, "what is the meaning of such language? and why have you intruded upon me this morning?"

"Ah, that is the bore of business; one never has a moment for himself or friends."

"Sir, I am not in the habit of classing my hired clerks among my friends exactly. If you have any business, state it at once: if not, I must request you to withdraw."

"I met with a little misfortune last night, my dear sir," said Hurst, coolly seating himself near the merchant, and leaning his arm upon the writing-table. "I have come to you for counsel, not only as the head of the firm, but as a man of the world."

"Really, sir, this is a strange proceeding. I cannot

imagine any thing in which my advice can be of value to you; I believe you receive your salary regularly—beyond that I have nothing to do with your affairs."

"Last night," continued Hurst, as quietly as if he were a millionaire, and speaking of some insignificant loss, "I had the ill-luck to lose a thousand dollars at cards——"

"Enough, sir," interrupted Mr. Lawrence; "I will not tolerate a gambler in my establishment for an hour—you are discharged."

"The most disagreeable thing in the whole affair," pursued Hurst, calmly, as if the other had not spoken, "is that the money was not mine."

"You have not dared——"

"Yes; it belonged to the firm. It was very careless on my part, but, after all, the sum is so trifling!"

"I will hear nothing farther; the law will deal with you. I am a just man—I thank heaven that I can look back on my life without being forced to blush for a single act—but I never falter where my duty is concerned."

"I knew, of course, that we could arrange the little matter at once, and so I tore myself away from a very charming woman in order to call upon you."

"A gambler and a swindler! Young man, what can your associations have been to leave you at this age so utterly depraved? Had you come to me in a spirit of repentance, my feelings would all have been in your favor, but you enter my house with insolent bravado, and acknowledge your theft without a blush. Do you know what is before you? Do you know the penalty of an act like this?"

Hurst was leaning back in his chair, toying with his watch-chain, and wore upon his lips the same smile of conscious superiority.

"Even if I were inclined to aid you, my partners would not permit it. Young man, you are lost!"

"The money you mean, my dear sir. *Apropos* of losses, I was sorry to see last night that you were as unfortunate as myself."

The merchant dropped his pen, and sat gazing into that insolently handsome face, pale and aghast.

"I hope it was not enough to inconvenience you! We must try fortune again to-night; she may be more propitious."

Mr. Lawrence struggled for composure. Dissimulation came to his aid, and except that the deathly pallor did not leave his face, he looked calm.

"You must be mad, young man; I can account for your conduct in no other way."

Hurst smiled again. He knew well the man with whom he had to deal; that death itself would be preferable, in his eyes, to the loss of one atom of the respectability which he had made his bulwark. The youth felt his advantage, and knew that when the man was convinced that he had learned all, he would cringe for mercy like the poltroon he was.

"Did you stop for supper?" he asked. "I hurried away, for I had an engagement of importance."

"Leave this room!" exclaimed Mr. Lawrence; "I will not be insulted under my own roof."

"My dear sir, how you misunderstand me! These little annoyances will occur to all the votaries of the green table: I have no hesitation in alluding to them."

Once more the man endeavored to intimidate him, though his voice shook as he said,

"If you remain here, you will be arrested. I advise you to leave the city, or remember the consequences."

"Nonsense!" returned Hurst, contemptuously. "You forget we are both men of the world, not gray-bearded Puritans. We must assist each other, Mr. Lawrence; these are but trifles."

He laid his hand upon the merchant's arm and looked full in his face, smiling still, but with a deadly gleam in his eyes, which seemed to fascinate the other like the glance of a serpent. An ashen gray settled over his features; he trembled from head to foot, as if the young man had dealt him a heavy blow.

"You know—you saw!" he gasped. "Good God, my reputation!"

"My dear Mr. Lawrence," said Hurst, laughing gayly. "I am sure last night must have shaken your nerves—let us change the subject."

"Mr. Hurst, I hope you will forgive my rudeness—I was very much hurried. Your affair is extremely unpleasant, but I will endeavor to conceal the loss from my partners, and will help you away. What say you to New Orleans?—charming place."

All this was uttered in breathless haste, rendered still more apparent from the other's composure.

"Thanks, but I have no desire to leave New York—quite impossible to exist elsewhere."

"You cannot remain here! I am very willing to help you; I have always felt an interest in you; I assure you money will be no object, and I am certain that my secret——"

"My dear Mr. Lawrence, how little you know me! I have completely forgotten the events of last night, or shall do so the moment we have replaced that little check—we will not refer to it again. I am glad to have met you this morning—in the confusion of business men have

no time to become acquainted. I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing you thus again?"

"Nothing would gratify me more," returned the merchant, with trembling lips. "Mrs. Lawrence receives every Saturday—I shall be happy to present you."

"And I to avail myself of the invitation. You know Mrs. Ransom?"

"The authoress? yes, very delightful woman."

"A most intimate friend of mine; nothing would gratify her so much as to know that you considered me your friend."

"Delighted to hear that; she so seldom goes out—genius has its peculiarities."

The wretched man was so ghastly and white that his appearance might have softened his deadliest enemy; but the youth in whose power he found himself knew no relenting. He liked to taste his revenge drop by drop, and would never cease while there was still a chord in his victim's heart that could be wrung.

"By-the-way, Mr. Lawrence, do you know Mr. Bentley?"

"Well, very well; an extremely rich man."

"I know that he has a charming daughter," replied Hurst, laughing again. "I met her at Mrs. Ransom's. Perhaps you would present me there?"

The merchant paused for a moment, writhing under that insolent assumption of power; but Hurst's eyes were still fixed upon him, and he could only falter out,

"With pleasure, of course."

"Indeed I must say good-morning," Hurst said, rising. "On Saturday you say Mrs. Lawrence receives?"

"But this thing—you understand!" exclaimed Law-

rence, catching him by the arm. "Tell me that my secret is safe—money—any thing—name your terms."

"Do not insult me," returned Hurst, coolly. "Between equals such offers are not endurable."

"Excuse me—I—— At least the check shall be sent down."

"Of course, of course!"

"May I mention one fact?"

"I shall listen with pleasure."

"I shall be delighted to receive you at my house; but it is quite possible that you might prefer to give up your situation—travel in Europe. We have long thought of sending an agent there. I shall always be willing to assist you in any way."

"I am infinitely obliged. If I decide to leave your establishment or the country, I will come and talk the matter over with you. Good-morning, Mr. Lawrence! On Saturday? Till then, *au revoir*."

He passed out of the room with the same careless ease and went down-stairs.

The merchant fell back in his chair completely exhausted by the excitement of the last hour. He looked like a man just recovering from a terrible illness. When he strove to rise from his seat he fell back, covering his face with his hands, and murmuring broken words of despair.

Hurst left the house and returned to his home. His face was lit up with fierce exultation, and his eyes fairly blazed with light.

"This is the beginning," he muttered, "and it promises well! The fair Gillian is almost reached—patience, patience, the end is not far off."

CHAPTER XVII.

THAT STRANGE MAN IN THE STREET.

Mr. Bentley had established himself permanently in town. His house stood upon a corner of an airy cross street and one of our principal avenues. The dwelling was of stone, broad, high and spacious, with grounds attached that gave it a dignity almost palatial; for the noble structure had been erected when some considerable space was possible to a private dwelling, and Mr. Bentley was rich enough to throw any number of vacant lots into a garden without fear of ruin.

The façade of this building was enriched with some exquisite sculpture, though the general effect was chastely simple. The broad, crescent-shaped steps swept up to the heavy door of carved walnut-wood with a grand disregard of space that was imposing in itself.

When that massive door was open, you saw through plates of limpid crystal, draped with a frost-work of lace, a broad, deep, entrance hall, paved with tesselated marble, and caught a glimpse of marble busts, bronze statues, and rare vases that reminded you at once of an Italian palace. This resemblance was carried out by grounds on which some of those fine old trees under which the Indians once built their wigwams, were still rooted. Huge elms, with their branches sweeping earthward; maples, whose blossoms blushed to the early spring, and whose leaves grew

golden or crimson when kissed by the autumn frosts, sheltered the grass as they had half a century before.

These primeval trees threw their shadows over a little paradise of flowers, and a stretch of the richest grass that the sun ever shone upon. Laburnums and lilacs grouped together, mingled the violet and gold of their blossoms. Wisterias fell in heavy luxuriance around the bay window and the back porticoes, garlanding them with great masses of azure. The turf was broken up with beds of glowing flowers; and the very stables, massive stone buildings as they were, took an aspect of picturesque beauty from the heavy trumpet flower, and Virginia creepers which draped them.

This house, half palace, half villa, had lately become the residence of Mr. Bentley; and Gillian, the bright, beautiful Gillian, was its mistress. It is true Aunt Hetty had come down from the country, for a brief time, as a sort of companion to the heiress; but so far as social life was concerned, she proved as helpless as a human being could well be. She was so timid, so nervously sensitive under the eye of a stranger, that it was painful to meet her out of the immediate domestic circle.

Mr. Bentley, always thoughtful for those he loved, had adorned his residence with an especial regard to his daughter's tastes; and every feature that could remind her of the bright land of song which had become almost native to her had been harmoniously blended with our superior home comforts for her especial gratification. All this was necessary to Gillian. She was a creature so used to the pure and beautiful, that mere comfort to her would have been poverty. So she took possession of the Eden her father had created, and graced it like a bird of paradise. The music of her harp rang from hall to hall; her laughter

sounded merrily among the flowers; and her sweet, clear voice bespoke the wealth of pure happiness with which she entered the great world, ready and eager to bear her part therein.

Gillian stood by a front window looking into the street. All at once she broke out eagerly, and called to her aunt—

"Aunt Hetty, dear Aunt Hetty, do come here and look at this man. I'm sure he's the person I met when I made a call on a lady last week. He has passed up and down two or three times, and looks so earnestly at this window. Every day, just at this time, he has taken this same promenade. Who can it be?"

Aunt Hetty came slowly toward the window and looked out. Something between a sigh and an exclamation broke from her lips, and she retreated into the room pale and agitated.

"Who is it, aunt? Do you know him?"

"No—no. I have seen that face before—that very face—perhaps he knows—perhaps it is me that he is in search of."

Gillian laughed merrily. The idea that a handsome young gentleman like that had been drawn beneath her window in hopes of seeing little Aunt Hetty, struck her as comical in the extreme.

Aunt Hetty colored to the temples beneath this sweet laugh, and attempted to creep from the room; but Gillian ran after her, threw both arms around her waist, and dancing backward toward the window, dragged the shrinking woman with her.

"There, you dear, blessed little flirt—you precious, darling old aunt—just let him see your face, while I hide behind the curtain which has always kept me from his sight. Now see if he does not take a guitar from under that

Spanish cloak—I wonder what he wears it for this bright day ?—and strike up a serenade."

Thus gayly dragging her aunt forward, and keeping, as she thought, her own face concealed, Gillian darted behind the curtains, leaving Aunt Hetty standing before the plate-glass, which, clear as crystal, revealed her distinctly to the young person, who still lingered on the opposite pavement.

The young man cast a long gaze into the window, flung a fold of the Spanish cloak across his shoulder, and deliberately crossed the street.

"Why, aunt—Aunt Hetty ! I say, he is coming over —he is mounting the steps. What can it mean ? Surely, surely he did not discover me peeping through the curtains ? Hark, the bell rings, Aunt Hetty. What can we do ? I had no idea he really was drawn here by your face. What will you say to him ?"

"Oh ! Gillian," almost sobbed Aunt Hetty, shrinking back into the room, "how could you be so cruel ?"

She was pale as snow, and seemed almost as cold, for her very lips trembled in the chill of her feelings.

"Oh, aunt, I did not mean it. Who would have thought this impudence possible ? I only wish father were here to chastise the adventurer as he deserves," cried Gillian, all in a glow of indignation.

"Your father chastise him ? No—no, girl, it has not come to that. Your mother, had she been living, might rebuke him, but no one else ; most of all, your father."

The little woman grew almost handsome as she spoke. Her lips turned red, and her cheeks burned. She looked spirited and haughty almost as Gillian herself.

Gillian gazed upon her with open lip and quick astonishment in her eyes.

"Why, aunt!"

"Hush, the servant!"

The footman entered. "A gentleman was below who wished to speak with the ladies."

Before Hetty could speak, Gillian answered him.

"Tell the young gentleman that the ladies of this house never receive strangers in the absence of its master."

Hetty seized her arm with both those little, shivering hands.

"Not that message—not that—say we are not at home—that some other time—only reflect, he may be a gentletleman, and have real business."

"Not with you or with me," answered Gillian, kindling more and more brightly in her pride. "He asked for the ladies; I alone am responsible for the answer."

Then turning to the footman, she repeated still more haughtily:

"Miss Bentley's compliments to the strange gentleman who forgets to send up his name, and say that she cannot receive him."

"But for me—you understand—please say that I am not well—not at all well—but some other time——"

Aunt Hetty broke off, for her voice quivered out of speech, and her poor white face looked the plea for forbearance that she could not utter.

The servant went out, greatly bewildered. Aunt Hetty followed him slowly to the door, and, leaning over the threshold, listened keenly with both hands pressed to her heart.

Gillian stood in the midst of the room flushing red to the fair temples, amazed and angry. But when Aunt Hetty heard the outer door close, and fell into a chair wavering to and fro, while faint moans broke through the

two hands locked over her face, this excitement faded away, and with that graceful humility which sprung from a warm heart, she drew close to her aunt and stole an arm around her neck.

But poor, meek, Aunt Hetty rose up like a princess, and cast that white arm aside.

"You have driven him from your door—you a Bentley, and her child, have done this thing. May God forgive you—may the saint who is in heaven forgive you! I fear —I fear I never can."

Gillian turned white, and for a moment stood motionless; but there was something in Aunt Hetty's air that awoke both sympathy and admiration. She would not be repulsed.

"Why, what is this? How can the dismissal of this intrusive person affect you so, dear aunt? Surely he had no right to hang about the house for days, and insult us by this attempt to force his way at last. In what have I done wrong, Aunt Hetty?"

The poor lady looked up and tried to smile, but it was a woful attempt, and only ended in a quiver of the lips.

"He should not have been driven forth like a dog for your mother's sake—for——"

"Why, Aunt Hetty, are you crazy? What has my mother in common with this person?"

"Your mother, our Sarah! Nothing, of course! How could she, and in her grave so many years? How came your mother to be mentioned? I did not do it!"

"I do not know—it was I perhaps who named her," said Gillian, subdued at once almost to tears by this mention of her mother. "But what has she in common with this stranger? Who is he, aunt? Tell me, and then let

me go away and cry alone: this mention of my mother, and both of us in a passion, wounds me to the heart."

Aunt Hetty arose and put her away with a wave of her little hand.

"Not now, Sarah: we will talk of it another time," she said, looking away into the distance.

Gillian was deeply touched by that look, it was so full of yearning tenderness, and the unconscious application of her mother's name added to the sad impression.

"Aunt," she said, quietly, and with tears in her eyes, "aunt, your mind is away—you are thinking of something afar off."

"Yes," said the aunt, in a whisper, "far off as heaven and earth, Sarah."

"Indeed you are ill, dear aunt!"

Hetty turned her face a little to avoid the gentle eyes that were bent upon her, and with the motion her look fell through the opposite window. The young man was standing upon the side-walk as he had first been discovered. A gleam came over her face, and without a word she left the room.

Gillian was bewildered by the scene that had just passed, and sat down to recover her thoughts; but her eyes were fixed on the window, and her hearing grew keen. The outer door closed softly, and after a moment she saw Aunt Hetty cross the street without bonnet or shawl, and speak to the strange man. A single word, it scarcely seemed more, and then he walked rapidly down the block, while Hetty returned to the house.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TWO OLD WOMEN.

In one of those narrow streets that open from the vicinity of Chatham Square, stood a small, two-story house built of brick, but with wooden steps that descended on the side-walk, and gable windows looking down from the roof. Two old women occupied this house; beside them and a large, gray cat, there was not a living creature beneath its roof; for the old ladies performed their own household duties, and lived out their isolated lives in silent companionship. The elder of the two, a little, withered-up creature approaching ninety, possessed some means of support beside the house she lived in; and the other was her dependent in all things.

This dependent old woman had turned seventy, and, on account of her comparative youth, was looked upon by her associate as a sprightly young thing, whose movements required especial vigilance, and whose limbs were capable of any amount of household exercise.

It is difficult for two women to be real heart companions, if cast on the same hearth-stone when the gray shadows are creeping over them. While old Mrs. Frost felt that she was doing wonders of charity in giving Mrs. Nicholson a home, she—poor, old gentlewoman—felt this dependence to the core of her weary heart, and took on herself the toil of a servant without in the slightest

degree softening the impressions of benevolence with which the elder female solaced her self-love.

These old women were sitting over their unsocial dinner, composed of a little hashed fish, the section of a mince-pie, and a scant portion of green tea, from which Mrs. Frost drained off one good, strong cup, and diluted the rest with warm water, observing, as she lifted the lid of the tea-pot for this purpose, that, for young persons like Mrs. Nicholson, strong tea was very unwholesome and apt to render them nervous, if not hysterical. This speech had been so often repeated that Mrs. Nicholson took it as a matter of course, while she meekly invigorated the weak tea with a little bluish milk, and helped herself sparingly to a spoonful of the fish, very much as the gray cat would have done had she found a chance to steal her portion of food from the table.

The old women sipped their tea in silence, tasting lightly of the fish; while now and then a kindly murmur and a fragment of food went down to the cat, who rubbed herself against one old woman's ankle, then marched off to beg of the other with a mute appeal of the eyes.

"I wonder," said old Mrs. Frost, "what has become of Michael Hurst. It is a long time since he was here; Jube has grown from a fair-sized kitten since then. The boy seems to forget his old friends: or maybe he's gone out of town on business."

"I think not. Yesterday he passed me in the street, when I was going to the grocery after those watercresses," said Mrs. Nicholson. "He didn't speak, but I'm sure it was him."

"Met him on your way to the grocery," cried Mrs. Frost, and her head began to vibrate like a pendulum; "so near my house, and not call? Why, Mary Nichol-

son, this comes of something you have done to offend him; your thoughtless, flighty ways will be the ruin of you yet. What have you been saying to the boy?"

"I haven't spoken to him in more than two months," said Mrs. Nicholson, coloring through her wrinkles at this charge of youthful indiscretion; "indeed I never do speak with him—he don't care to talk with me, I'm sure."

"But then what keeps him away?"

"I don't know. Wasn't it then he asked for something, that you didn't want to give him? I thought so."

"Mrs. Nicholson, you must have been listening. I'm astonished."

"But I was in the room and could not help it. If people will talk before me what can I do?"

The old woman of ninety shook her head in a dissatisfied way, and muttered, "Poor thing! poor, weak thing! She hasn't got the experience which brings discretion. It's no use scolding her."

So, with a philosophic wave of the little, withered hand, she proceeded to cut the section of pie in two equal parts, measuring each to a fraction with the flat of her knife; then she scraped the fragments of fish together for Jube, and, leaning back in her Boston rocking-chair, left Mrs. Nicholson to wash the dishes, while she prepared herself for a long nap.

But just as her eyes began to dose, and her little hands were falling apart from their clasp on her chest, a knock at the street door carried Mrs. Nicholson into the hall. She turned the latch, and found upon the door-step the very young man whom they had been talking about.

"Mr. Hurst, is it you?" she said, happy to see any human being in that unsocial house. "Step light, please; Mrs. Frost is in her first sleep."

"But I came to see Mrs. Frost, aunty, and can't possibly wait till she drones herself awake again, so just give her a nudge—tell her I'm here, and—ha! you look frightened, and shake that poor, little cap dismally. Daren't do it, ha! Well, I'll rouse her myself."

That instant an old, withered head appeared through the sitting-room door, shaking like a cluster of dry leaves, but with an attempt at welcome, which, though grim enough, was all the cordiality that infirm woman could muster out of her worn old age.

"Michael, is it you?"

"Grandmother! Well, you are awake, and glad to have me back again a little while, I hope."

"Glad?" said the old lady, and a smile displaced the wrinkles about her mouth; "you've been a long time waiting to see if I would be glad or not. But come in, Mike. Dear me what a dashing young fellow you've grown! Mary Nicholson! Mary Nicholson! just pour some boiling water into the tea-pot, and put in an even spoonful of Young Hyson. I dare say Michael would like a good, old-fashioned cup of tea. We'd just done dinner, but that's of no consequence. Mary Nicholson! run around the corner for another pie."

Young Michael laughed.

"No, no, grandmother; I'm not hungry, and never drink tea now."

"Never drink tea? Why, Mike, what has come over you? Never drink tea?"

"Not at this time of day. But never mind, I'll take a cup now, and a piece of pie too, if aunty will bring it for me."

Mrs. Frost nodded her head half a dozen times, for when she once began it was difficult to stop, and Mrs.

Nicholson went patiently out in search of a pie at the next bakery. When she was gone, Hurst took the old lady's hand and kissed it with some show of real affection.

"I am glad she is gone," he said, "for I want a little private talk with you, grandmother."

"Grandmother!" muttered the old woman. "Why, Mike, you are getting too old for that. I never had a child in my life, as Mary Nicholson, the giddy thing, says: and to have a tall, handsome young fellow calling me grandmother is enough to take away one's reputation. I really thought that was very sensible, very sensible indeed, for Mary Nicholson, considering her want of experience. Still it does sound pleasant when you call me grandmother, so I'll run the risk."

Here the old lady sat down in her rocking-chair, with an increased vibration of the head, and a sparkle of pleasure in her dim eyes. Hurst knelt down by her side, as he had done a thousand times when a boy, with a glow of real affection, which rendered his manner irresistible to the lonely soul he addressed.

"But grandmother, tell me, and oh! tell me truly, have I no right to claim some relationship to you? I cannot remember when you first took an interest in my life—when you first gave me a home. If I am related to you, legally or illegally, nearly or remotely, oh! tell me now. I shall not love you more or less for the knowledge: but it is very important that I know all about myself. Grandmother, dear grandmother, tell me every thing!"

The old lady began to vibrate in her chair—body, head and all. She tried to lift her hand in deprecation of farther questions, but it fell gently on the young man's shoulder, and a tear trembled into her dim eyes.

"Michael, I can tell you nothing, because, of a cer-

tainty, I know nothing myself; what I suspect is not evidence, and may mislead."

"But you know how I came under your care."

"Yes, so far as that, I can tell you all I know myself."

"Do, oh, do tell me all you know!"

"That is little—nothing in fact."

"Still, let me have it, dear grandmother."

"My husband, you can just remember him, Michael, and know that he was minister of a little Baptist society, which was not rich enough in those days to have a meeting-house to itself, but worshipped in a room around the corner, and was built up gradually, by the goodness of God and my husband's labor, into a powerful church. He did not live to see it, but his teachings have brought forth fruit a thousand fold."

"I know, I know; you have told me this again and again, dear grandmother; but what of myself?"

The young egotist had no sympathy with the dear memories which made the old lady dwell so lovingly on her husband's good works, and cut them short with this burst of selfish impatience.

She drew back, nervous and bewildered; then answered, with touching meekness:

"Yes, I dare say that I have told you about him a great many times, till you are tired of it; but about yourself—well, that, too, was one of his good works, for he was not among the servants of God that confine their labors to one society, or to a single line of duty. He went forth into the highways and the hedges and forced sinners to come in. He was so charitable, too, without a sin of his own, that I could ever discover; he had no end of patience and forbearance for the sins of others."

"Yes, yes; I know all this!" cried the young man, impatiently; "but of myself?"

"Well, this is a part of what I was saying: so be more patient, or I will not speak another word!" cried the old lady, with the stubbornness of extreme years. "To speak of you, a poor, helpless orphan baby, is to exalt his goodness. My husband not only cared for the souls of his parishioners in the next world, but he helped them forward in this. The poor were his children."

"Well, and I was one of those poor orphan babies?" cried the youth, impatiently.

"You might have been two or three years old when he brought you home. Yes, it was just two years after my nieces, Sarah and Hetty Hart, come to visit me, and a few months after Sarah got married to that rich Mr. Bentley."

"Mr. Bentley—did a niece of yours marry a man by that name?"

"And didn't you know that? Why, yes, our Sarah married one of the most splendid and wealthy men in New York. His cousin, who was killed, used to be here a good deal, when the girls stayed with us, and the two young fellows often came together. The rich man was poor then; but after his cousin died the property all came to him, and he married Sarah."

"And what became of her? Is she living now? Has she any children?"

"She died years ago, beyond sea, and left a little girl, her very picture."

"What was her name?"

"A curious name for a girl—'Gillian.' I never knew where they picked it up. It has a heathenish sound to me."

"Gillian, ah, and Miss Hetty Hart your niece, Daniel Hart and his daughter: are these the connections of Mrs. Bentley?"

"Yes, that is the family. You were up in Rockland once—did they never tell you about the Bentleys?"

"Never a word."

"Well, it was no secret. I wonder Hetty never told you about them, for it was considered a great match for our Sarah. Hetty was here, I remember, just after Mr. Frost brought you home; and now I remember Sarah came too every day till she went beyond seas: they took a good deal of interest in you, and cried over you more than once. I caught them at it—but then they were tender-hearted girls always: the sight of a bird astray from its nest would set them a-crying always, especially Sarah."

"But this is no intelligence, grandmother—it does not inform me who I am, or who my parents were," cried the youth. "Did your husband never tell you where I came from, or to whom I belonged?"

"No, he never did. His good acts were done in secret, and though he called me his right hand, I never knew what the left hand did, especially in his charities. If the sinful gave him their confidence, it was sacred between himself and the throne of God. Many a miserable girl has he snatched from under the cruel feet of the multitude, and saved from deeper sin. Many a child——"

"Don't speak of that—do not couple me with such Christian charities," cried the young man, wildly, while his face flushed scarlet, and his eyes filled with smouldering flame. "The mother who can leave this shameful orphanage on her child deserves to be trodden to the earth—crushed out of existence——"

He broke off suddenly, and stood still with his hand clutched in a firm grip, his features gradually becoming pale, and his eyes fixed on the door; for during his vehement speech it had opened, and Aunt Hetty Hart stood mute and still on the threshold.

She met that look of inflamed passion with a wild gaze and a lip of marble. His impetuosity seemed to terrify her into stone: she was so unused to violent feelings, poor thing, that their utterance abashed her to death. After a little while, she glided into the room and sat down, shivering and drawing her mantle tightly as if she were cold.

"Oh!" said the young man, with a forced and bitter laugh, "you have just come in time, Miss Hart. I am trying to persuade my old grandmother here to tell me who I really am; and she was kindly insinuating that I was little less than a pauper child, raked up from the gutter where a shameless mother had left me. You cannot wonder that intelligence like this sheds something besides rose-leaves on my temper, and that I was very near cursing myself and those to whom I owe life."

Hetty looked at him steadily. Her large, sorrowful eyes dilated; her lips grew cold.

"Do not curse either your father or your mother, Michael. Leave them with God—leave them both to the great, just God, who allows no sin, open or hidden, to go unpunished."

The words dropped solemnly and slowly from her lips; but even the touching sadness of that voice failed to influence the intemperate youth.

"No, it is useless cursing them; they cannot feel or know it," he said, bitterly; "one might as well denounce the wind. But you had some knowledge of me when a child: Grandmother Frost has just told me so—you and your sister, the wife of that rich Mr. Bentley, whose house

I saw you at a little while back. If you are human, tell me something by which I may guess who I am."

Aunt Hetty shrunk away from him.

"I have no power. I cannot, if I would, give up a mother to the curses of her child."

"And so all ends in this. With every effort to know something of my own history, I am thrown back to fight with shadows again."

The young man flung himself away from Aunt Hetty as he spoke, and prepared to go; but some new thought struck him, and he turned back.

"One thing I wish to ask. There is a lady living on the Bloomingdale road, who has been a very kind and good friend to me for some years. Is she known to any of you? Her name is Ransom, and she is an author of high standing."

The old ladies looked at each other, pondered a while; then each shook her head—they knew no such woman. Aunt Hetty had heard the name, and remembered that Gillian Bentley had brought one of Mrs. Ransom's books into Rockland county; but of the author herself she knew nothing.

The timid woman said this in a frightened way, and seemed to shrink into herself when another sharp exclamation broke from the young man.

"Another mystery," he said; "but I was a fool to inquire about her here," and with angry clouds on his brow he started off, almost knocking the old woman down who was coming in with the pie she had been ordered to bring.

"I beg your pardon—I am really sorry," he said, as the old creature reeled back against the wall. "I did not mean to hurt you; but that stubborn old thing will tell me nothing, and it drives me mad."

The old woman, instead of being angry at his carelessness, was grateful for this half apology; and softly closing the door, said to him, in a hurried whisper—

"I only wish I could help you out of all this trouble. Tell me what it is about."

He laughed a low and bitter laugh.

"I am a poor orphan in search of my father and mother," he said, "and no one will tell me where to find them I believe Mrs. Frost could help me if she pleased."

"Did she know any thing?"

"Her husband did; but he is dead."

The old woman pondered a moment, with a lean finger pressed to her lip.

"I don't think she knows any thing about it; but if she does I'll find it out for you. Come again before long. It's pleasant to have company drop in now and then."

"Find out what I want to know, and I'll come to see you every day of my life," he whispered, earnestly. "Miss Hart is in the sitting-room: take notice of what they talk about after I am gone."

"I will—as sure as you live I will, and trust me for more than that. It'll be something to think about, and that is a great deal to a woman who does not get a chance to speak sometimes for twenty-four hours together."

"Well, well," said the young man, "be my friend, as you always have been, and if I ever win good fortune, you shall share it. So, now, good-day, aunty; I hear a movement as if some one were coming.

With these words he disappeared, just as the pale face of Aunt Hetty looked through the door.

She saw his shadow as he went, and called out faintly, but there was no strength in her feeble voice to summon him back or lead him from his desperate course.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BLOOMINGDALE COTTAGE.

YOUTH is very sad at times: to it the future appears vague and unreal as eternity is to old age. A longing desire to know what lies beyond the present—a dreamy melancholy—timid fears of what may be, is sure to settle upon the young, susceptible mind, like morning fog over a garden of roses, making the sunshine more vivid when it comes. To the sensitive and most highly endowed this is certain to be true; and for such real happiness seldom exists, save in snatches and bright gleams, till imagination becomes a power, and then the blossom-season of life is gone.

Gillian Bentley was like an April day, now bright and richly happy, now saddened almost to tears. Neither of these moods, perhaps, had a definite cause, but they were a part of her nature. The shadows which the moonlight casts to the earth, the perishing of a rose she had loved, a gloomy look from her father—each or any of these were enough to cloud her pure forehead, and make her step languid for hours together. Yet when she was cheerful, nothing could be more charming than the exuberant flow of her spirits. She was like the mocking-bird of Alabama, when it begins to sing among the great magnolia blossoms as the dawn flushes over them.

Indeed Gillian was a splendid creature in all her moods, and you always associated her with something rich and precious; the glow of life in her was so bright, that it was

impossible to class her among those who are born for toil or common suffering. I cannot describe this girl exactly as she appears to me, for her character seemed to vary every moment; and her face—one might as well attempt to make the perfume of a flower visible, as convey an idea of its beautiful changes.

It was only in her sad moods that Gillian visited Mrs. Ransom. When she had been thoughtful an hour or two from any cause, the result was certain to be a visit to her friend, for such that singular woman became from the first.

These calls to the Bloomingdale cottage usually took place in the morning, when Mrs. Ransom was almost sure to be in her library, and equally sure to refuse herself to all other visitors.

On the day after Hurst had made an unsuccessful effort to visit her father's house, Gillian drove to the Bloomingdale road. She had not recognized the face of the young man, and the conduct of her aunt gave her some little anxious surprise. The old lady had been absent two or three hours after his disappearance, and the usual nervousness of her demeanor increased painfully on her return, until she glided off like a ghost to her own room and had not since appeared.

Gillian felt that she had offended her aunt. She could not even conjecture the nature of her fault; but her quick sensitiveness was aroused, and she fled to Mrs. Ransom for consolation.

Ruby had been taught to admit Gillian at all hours, without question of time or convenience: so the young girl passed her with a light step, and entered the library. It was empty: the writing-table stood in the centre,

littered with papers, and the easy-chair she knew so well stood beside it; but the lady herself was nowhere visible.

This was a disappointment. Gillian hesitated a moment, and sat down in Mrs. Ransom's chair with a feeling almost of reverence. Her eyes fell upon the bronze ink-stand, and instantly her thoughts flew back to Italy and the spot where her mother slept beneath a perpetual bloom of roses. The chair she occupied commanded a fine view of the river. It was spring-time, and early morning; the soft green of the trees, rendered brighter from the dew that was but partially exhaled, framed in glimpses of the river which sparkled in the early sunshine like veins of diamonds. Along the broken slopes of the bank a few old apple trees, heavy with blossoms, drooped to the soft, fresh turf; and, from the crevice of a rock, near the water, a young cherry tree, the growth of some stray seed, was just shedding its delicate flowers like a snow storm over a carpet of wood-moss that crept on to its roots; groups of lilacs and snow-balls broke on the wildness of the scene, and, without knowing it, Gillian began to smile, the stillness was so beautiful.

As she sat gazing through the window, Mrs. Ransom came slowly up from the river with a branch of wild honeysuckle in her hand. Her morning-dress, of a delicate blue, brightened the scene as she passed along. The ribbons of her pretty morning-cap fluttered in the wind, while her animated face and elastic tread gave queenliness to her whole appearance.

The lady was not alone: by her side walked a tall man, not very young in appearance, but with a quiet and calm stateliness which rendered his presence imposing as that of the lady. Sometimes Mrs. Ransom took the gentleman's arm, and rested on it a moment, as she conversed.

Then she would stoop to pick a fern leaf, or a violet, from the grass, and move on again, with her head bent, as if listening to some subject that interested her greatly. Thus the two came toward the house, mounted the balcony to which the bay window opened, and sauntered through into the library.

Gillian stood up, blushing and confused. She felt like an intruder; and the shy grace which this sensation gave to her appearance was in itself a charm.

Mrs. Ransom started, and almost stepped back, when she saw this queenly girl standing there, with a smile on her lip, and a flush stealing over her whole face; but she recovered herself at once.

"My child—my dear Miss Bentley!" she said, with a confused attempt at welcome, "you here and waiting. Oh! I forgot—Mr. Woodworth, Miss Bentley."

Mrs. Ransom sat down, panting for breath. It was her habit, when excited, to tear apart any thing that chanced to be in her hand. Thus she began to strip the honeysuckle branch of its blossoms, and scatter them on the carpet, while she watched the two persons she had introduced as they recognized the courtesy.

The gentleman was evidently struck by the glow of Gillian's face, and by her subdued graciousness. He made some observation about the beauty of the morning, and looked about for a seat, while Gillian glided away from the easy-chair she had occupied, and drew gently up to Mrs. Ransom.

"You are not angry! Tell me, dear lady, have I intruded?" she said, bending gently toward her friend.

Her sweet, deprecating way touched Mrs. Ransom to the heart. Her face brightened with one of those grand, soul-lit smiles that made it resplendent at times.

"No, not angry, child; and you never can intrude—remember that!" she answered, casting the torn branch away, as if it were some painful thought which she flung off with an effort. "I was a little jealous that another should see you, that is all: so just scatter those roses back from your face—you have nothing to blush at."

Mrs. Ransom spoke in a subdued tone, and Gillian imitated her as she answered:

"I have been sitting in your chair, dear lady, with the old gentleman looking down upon me so earnestly. It almost made my heart stand still when I first met his glance. It seemed as if he wanted to tell me something. Is it the likeness of some one you have loved?"

The gentleman had taken up a book, and was glancing over its pages, as this low-toned conversation commenced. Thus the two ladies were left, in a measure, to themselves. Mrs. Ransom's face changed again, and, with a saddened look, she lifted her eyes to the portrait.

"Yes!" she said, almost in a whisper, "I loved him, heaven only knows how much! Loved him almost better than myself—than—than— He was a good man, Gillian—a rare man. I think that shame, or a knowledge of sin in those he loved, would have broken his heart. But nothing of this kind ever reached him. He died calmly, happily, I think."

Her eyes did not fill with tears as she spoke, but a flush rose about them, and her voice was low and hoarse.

"It is a calm, stern face," whispered Gillian, drawing closer and closer to her friend; "I cannot tell why, but his look almost brings the tears to my eyes. He is not at all like papa, but there is something that reminds me of him about the picture."

"Indeed, is your father like that? But it is not likely

that a resemblance could exist between the two. It is because you like the picture."

"Like it? Yes, but that would not account for this feeling. His eyes make me sad."

Mrs. Ransom pressed the hand which Gillian had unconsciously laid in her clasp, but she did not speak; for that moment Mr. Woodworth closed his book and laid it on the table, conscious that the conversation was becoming oppressive to Mrs. Ransom, but apparently only weary of turning over the leaves.

With a quiet, almost indifferent manner, he began to converse about a poem that he had read. Mrs. Ransom replied in her usual earnest, frank way. Gillian did not speak, but her eyes began to kindle, and her cheeks grew red. In her whole life she had never heard a voice like that, so deep-toned, so clearly musical. The objection that Mrs. Ransom made to some sentiment that escaped him brought the fire to his soul. He began to talk earnestly, eloquently—so eloquently that Mrs. Ransom became interested—her thoughts flashed back to his own—her laugh rang out, full and clear. Spite of her age—spite of a certain troubled expression that habitually lay upon her—she grew brilliant beyond any thing that Gillian had believed her capable of.

The conversation was of a kind the young girl had never listened to before, running from subject to subject: poetry, prose, wild fancies that possessed all the elements of poesy without its rhythm, flashed before her. She was a being to feel all that was beautiful in the meeting of two minds so richly gifted, and her sympathies went with them to the full. Hitherto she had almost reverenced Mrs. Ransom as an author; now her whole soul went

forth in homage to her womanliness and the truth of her character.

Woodworth read all that was passing in that fresh, young heart, with a glance. The admiration, and even homage, he saw there, inspired him with feelings more worthy than those of gratified vanity, but he scarcely addressed her in words, and he was entirely free from any of those pretty arts with which smaller men attempt to ingratiate themselves into favor with a young and beautiful woman. Indeed he was a man far above the usual level of society.

Perhaps the presence of Mrs. Ransom might have rendered his conduct, so far as she was concerned, more reserved than was usual to him; for he could not but remark how vigilantly her eyes followed his glances whenever they wandered toward the bright creature by her side. There was something anxious and almost stern in her manner, once or twice when she thus intercepted his admiration, which he could not understand.

At last Gillian arose to go; for, from the first, she had felt almost like an intruder. Mrs. Ransom did not urge her to stay, but arose and walked with her toward the door.

Woodworth smiled. He was too thorough a man of society to be baffled in this way; and, seeing some wild flowers on the table where Mrs. Ransom had cast them down, he took up a few of the violets and handed them to Gillian, smiling half-maliciously in Mrs. Ransom's face, as he lifted his head from the profound inclination that had accompanied the gift.

Mrs. Ransom frowned, but instantly a smile crossed her lip at being thus outgeneraled; for she was a woman

to forgive, nay, admire the quickness of wit that overmastered her own, even when it baffled her wishes.

As for Gillian, she blushed like a sudden dawn, and, with unconscious grace, lifted the violets to her lips, casting a purple shadow over the smiles that hovered there. In her whole life she had never received a gift which stirred her heart so pleasantly. She forgot Aunt Hetty—the young man of the sidewalk—every thing, in the happy bewilderment that fell upon her.

Mrs. Ransom went forth with her to the outer door, kissed her with sweet tenderness of manner, and stood, with the young man at her side, while the carriage rolled away. As it swept round a curve of the road, they caught a last glimpse of her, leaning back in the carriage and holding the violets to her lips—the violets over which a soft, low sigh passed—giving and taking perfume as the horses swept her away from the spot that had been to her the paradise of an hour.

"And who is she?" inquired Woodworth, as his eyes met those of Mrs. Ransom, which were all at once clouded with sadness.

"She is—she is an angel—a good, bright angel, that keeps me from wishing to die," said Mrs. Ransom; and her sad eyes swam in tears.

"She is a happy one to excite such emotions in a heart like yours," answered the young man; and, with the tact born of perfect refinement, he left the lady to her solitude.

CHAPTER XX.

AT THE OLD HOMESTEAD IN ROCKLAND COUNTY.

THE apple trees were in blossom on the old Rockland farm—fragrant, bright and rich in beauty as they had given their breath to the air on that spring morning when Daniel Hart met his sister on her way to the post-office, when that as yet unexplained letter was sent to the man who had now been in his grave so many years. There was no change in the landscape, except that more perfect cultivation had enriched the basin of Rockland county, thinning the wilderness of its trees and leaving pleasant homesteads in their places.

Daniel was walking along the foot-path across the very meadow-path Sarah had met him. The wild meadow-flowers starred the grass on either side as they brightened it then, but the path had been trod, year after year, till plantain leaves and burdock, the wild growth that marks the steady footprints of man, had sprung up and become thrifty along the way.

But Daniel Hart, the cheerful young fellow, proud of his newly-formed marriage-ties, honest, earnest and generous, where was he? That heavy, calm man with his eyes kind and serene like those of a Newfoundland dog, but full of human intelligence—that stalwart form stooping at the shoulders, more from the weariness of a hard day's toil than from age; the firmly planted foot, slow but sure in its tread · the toil-hardened hand swing-

ing gently as he walked—did these belong to the youth of twenty years ago? Had the smart youngster grown into that strong, steady man?

A yoke of oxen, just unhitched from a plow that stood in the furrow of a distant corn-field, pursued their swinging walk homeward a little in advance of their owner, bending their necks low and patiently to the yoke, as a married couple, with the light of a honeymoon lying twenty years off, stoops kindly under the mutual burdens of life.

Once in a while the farmer spoke a word to his oxen, for they were old friends, and he loved to reward their toil with a cheerful sound; sometimes he stooped to pick a blue flag or violet from the grass; and again he would lash the dark leaves with his cart-whip, smiling as he cut them up at the roots, and sending a golden drift of dandelions after them with a second whirl of the lash.

At last he came to the bars where Sarah had waited for him, twenty years before, after putting her letter in the post-office: and there, just at the same spot, stood a a neighbor with a letter in his hand bearing the New York post-mark, and with the name of his daughter daintly traced on the snow of its envelope.

"Here's a letter for some of your women folks," said the man, as he placed it in his hand. "I was over to the corner and the post-master asked me to bring it along."

"Much obliged. Won't you come up to the house and have some supper?"

"Not to-night; the old woman will be waiting for me. Good-day."

Daniel Hart returned his salutation with a request to be remembered to the women folks, and, as the man walked on, glanced again at the superscription.

"It's from Gillian," he said, half aloud. "I expect she wants to steal Martha as well as her old aunt—bless her sweet eyes!"

He passed on toward the house, and, when his daughter heard his step on the porch, she ran out to meet him.

"How late you are, father!" she exclaimed; "tea has been ready this half-hour; I'm afraid the biscuits are cold."

"Just let me wash up and have a wipe at the roller towel and I'm ready," he replied, patting her head with his broad hand. "Here is something to take up your time while I do it."

"It's from Cousin Gillian," Martha cried, joyfully, as he placed the letter in her hands.

"I reckoned as much. I thought Aunt Hetty's stiff fingers couldn't make such finefied lines as them."

Martha had broken the seal and was too deeply absorbed in the contents of her epistle to heed his words. A letter was an unusual visitor to the girl, and the arrival of Gillian's was looked upon as an important event.

A joyful expression escaped her as she read; but her father was rubbing his forehead vigorously with the coarse towel and did not look around.

"Oh, what do you think, father!" she exclaimed. "So kind of her, dear, good Gillian. Isn't she a cousin worth having?"

"Well, what's the matter?" asked Daniel Hart, turning down his shirt sleeves.

"She wants me to come to New York and make her a visit; only think, she is going to give a grand party in honor of her new house. Won't it be a house-warming worth while?"

"And your silly little head is turned with the idea.

Well, well, it's nat'ral enough, I suppose. Young folks will be young folks."

"Can I go, father? Do say yes. Oh! I am so crazy to be off."

"I ain't much given to saying no to you, am I?" he asked, smiling kindly down upon her.

"Then I can go. I am so happy—how nice it will be! And Aunt Hetty, too—I do want to see her so much. Oh! dear, won't I have fun?"

She was interrupted in her exclamations by the appearance of an ebony face at the door, crowned with a roll of black, woolly-hair that circled the corresponding head like a turban.

"'Spect the tea'll be cold if the men folks don't come," said a discontented voice. "It's be'n a drawin' next door to an hour."

"Coming, Dinah—all on hand," said Daniel Hart, pleasantly.

"And oh! Dinah," exclaimed Martha, "I am going to New York. My Cousin Gillian has sent for me. Isn't it splendid?"

The old negress drew up her gaunt form, and looked as if she thought her young mistress was not sufficiently alive to a sense of her own dignity.

"'Spected she would, young Misses. Who would she a-sent for but her own nat'ral born cousin?"

"But it is so kind of her, Dinah—so very kind!"

"Seem in a great pucker to go away from hum," grumbled Dinah; "I never seed no good of gallivanting all over the world. I knows what York is, 'cause I've travelled; I've be'n thar with Miss Sarah, and it's my 'pinion you'll get lost."

"Not if you go with her, Dinah," said the farmer.

"Me go travelling ag'in?" said the old woman, brightening up at once.

"Gillian wants me to bring you," added Martha; "she speaks about it particularly, and says you must save her some of those old-fashioned cakes nobody can make but you."

"Oh! de Lord," said Dinah, with a chuckle that twisted her features into something like an oak-knot. "Massy sakes alive! Wal, de young lady allers was as sweet spoken as if she had sugar-plums in her mout. Hi! hi! hi!" and she went off into another and more prolonged chuckle. "How she did use tu walk into dem doughnuts; 'spect she'd never git nothin' like dem with her fangled city niggers, nohow."

"And now let's have supper," said Mr. Hart; "you and Martha can talk all this over when we're done."

"I never 'trudes myself into no discuss," said Dinah, drawing herself up with immense dignity and sailing into the house. But all the while she was giving the finishing touches to the tea-table her mouth was puckered into a grim smile; and once or twice she was obliged, in order to quiet her excessive delight, to give a punch in the side to her little sable handmaiden, who dodged vigorously every time she become unfortunate enough to get in her way.

Martha sat down at the table radiant with pleasant anticipation. Her brown eyes shone like twin-stars, and her cheeks wore a richer bloom than the cinnamon-roses that looked in at her through the kitchen window.

Daniel Hart finished his meal almost in silence, scarcely heeding the broken sentences which passed between Dinah and her young mistress. He could not tell why, but, apart from the pain of losing Martha, he felt a vague

fear of the idea of this visit. Back into the past went his thoughts again. Sarah's image rose before him bright with youthful hope and anticipation. What a gulf of bitter memories rolled between the present and that spring time of life!

He pushed back his plate with a sigh, and seated himself by the window. Martha ran to get his pipe, and, having carefully filled it, brought it to him, holding a live coal between the tongs that he might light it.

"You look tired, father," she said, when the preparations were completed, and he was puffing out a white column of smoke from his lips.

"Likely as not; but it'll all be gone in the morning."

Dinah summoned her mistress away nominally for a discussion about a pickle-crock, but in reality to whisper in her ear:

"'Spose we'll start right off, young Misses?"

"At once, my cousin says; I'll ask father." She ran out of the pantry again, calling:

"Father, father!"

"Well?" he asked, with a subdued sadness in peculiar contrast to her unrestrained joy.

"Shall we go soon? Gillian wants me at once, you know——"

"As soon as you can get ready, darter."

"Next week, then—do you hear, Dinah? We are going next week."

"Dat's no lifetime," replied the stately dame, in a tone which vainly attempted to express indifference. "Get out of my way, you Liz!" she added, to her unfortunate assistant, but the girl was accustomed to the mode of enforcing obedience which this tone threatened, and prudently ducked her woolly head to escape the threatened

blow. "Jest you wash the dishes, you lazy nigger!" muttered Dinah, in a tone her master could not hear, "and keep your fingers out o' de pie."

"Hain't touched 'em," retorted Liz, wiping her mouth with her fingers in direct contradiction to her bold assertion.

Martha was accustomed to these altercations, and, while listening to her father, paid no attention to this scene.

"And you are glad to go?" Mr. Hart said, striving to be cheerful.

She slipped her little hand into his, and the browned fingers closed over it with a gentle pressure; while the kindly smile which always softened his features, when he met the clear glance of her brown eyes, passed over his whole face.

"Would you rather I stayed at home?" she whispered, struggling between an ardent desire to go out into the world so natural to the young, and reluctance to leave the fond parent, from whom she had been scarcely separated since her earliest remembrance.

"No, darter," he replied; "you are young, and it is natural you should want to enjoy yourself a little. I ain't going to hinder you. Mebby I shall be a little lonesome at first; but, but——"

"But I don't want to leave you all alone, father dear; you will miss me, I know. I cannot go, that's all!"

"Of course you shall! You have been a good darter, Martha, and never given your old father a moment's pain."

Martha bowed her head, her excitement for an instant subdued by the earnestness of his voice.

"I couldn't be any thing else," she whispered; "few

girls have a father like mine. Uncle Bentley is a good man, but I wouldn't swap my father for him," and she threw her arms caressingly about the strong man's neck.

"Misses!" called Dinah, from the pantry.

"Well, what is it?"

"Won't I give the house a clearin' up to-morrow?"

"I guess so, Dinah; we will talk about it in the morning."

Dinah muttered something about putting off things which ought to be attended to at once, and went on with her work in indignant silence.

All that evening, Martha was in a state of pleasurable unrest, which kept her eyes sparkling, and her cheeks a-glow with the thousand happy thoughts to which her quick imagination gave rise.

When she had kissed her father good-night and stolen up to her room, Dinah went creeping after, and, seating herself on the floor by her young mistress' bed, indulged freely in the numerous projects which were flitting through her mind. Dinah was quite as much excited with the thought of the coming visit as Martha herself, although she did her best to hide it, ascribing her anxiety only to a fear of leaving her dear child to undertake the journey alone.

Daniel Hart sat for a long time in his easy-chair, forgetful of fatigue, and indulging in mournful memories of the past and present, until he grew heavy-hearted with thoughts of his coming loneliness. But when he rose in the morning, all trace of the sorrowful revery had disappeared, and he went about his labors cheerful and kindly as was his wont.

CHAPTER XXI.

DINAH'S TOILET IN THE GARRET.

But Dinah was quite unable to sleep until she had looked somewhat to the preparations necessary for her journey. So when she left Martha's room, armed with a flaring candle, she betook herself to the garret, where stood the chest in which the treasured odds and ends of her life had been heaped together. A huge padlock secured this miscellaneous wealth from Lizzy's prying eyes; and when Dinah unlocked it she looked sharply round in fear that the girl might have been dodging her footsteps.

Very incongruous were the articles displayed by the opening of the chest. Old dresses and cloaks, garments which Martha had worn when a baby, a black tea-pot without a nose, and a Britannia cream-jug that had lost its handle, masses of artificial flowers, and a collection of old shoes, for Dinah was a perfect martyr to her feet and a monomaniac on the subject of saving worn-out slippers. All these things were carefully taken out and held to the light for closer inspection. Dinah's heart sunk within her when she reflected that, probably, she might not be allowed to take the chest on her intended advent into the fashionable world, and the very idea of leaving it behind gave her a cramp at the heart.

"Now," says Dinah, dropping into a gentle train of calculation, "s'posin Mister Hart, or the young un, turn

up their noses at dis 'spectable chist, what is I to 'pend on—a band-box, a bundle, or one ob dem kivered baskets? Not none of dem, nohow. If Miss wants a waitin' maid, as she can 'pend one in all 'spects for her manners and 'spectability, dis chist es got to go long jes as sartin as I stan' here. But s'posing she sots her foot down and says, 'Dinah, I's willin' to take you wid a band-box or bundle, but not the chist.' Then what'll yer do, Dinah? Will yer stay hum and make Liz pay for it all, or guv in an' go anyhow? Make up your mind in dis 'spect, Dinah, 'cause there's gwine to be a tussel, and yer'd as well be ready, Dinah, yer had.'"

After this soliloquy, Dinah rested her head on one hand and an elbow on her knee, evidently making up her mind.

"Well," she said, at last, "if I mus' guv up, I mus'—no 'stake about dat; for I'se bound to make dem York niggers stan' 'bout afore I'se done wid 'em. Jest tink how arkard that poor chil'd be widout a 'sperienced person to 'tend to her manners. So s'posin' dey stands out, what is de least as I can get long wid?"

Here Dinah plunged her hand into the open chest, and drew forth a quilt of marvellous pattern, which she partially unfolded on her lap.

"Dis is a gwoin' anyhow," she muttered; "I'se 'quainted wid der stuck-up houses in York, partly by 'sperience, an' partly 'cause I'se be'n told. Dey is whitened sepulchurs in de parlor; but when yer gits up-stairs toward the roof, look out! Ain't a gwine to catch the rhumetes for none of 'em—that kiver's boun' to go!"

Here Dinah laid the quilt down and drew forth a small cotton shawl, so gay in its original red, green and yellow, that time had left it a gaudy article still. The chief desire of Dinah's heart had always been a turban, such as

she had heard of among the better class of Southern negresses—heard of, but never seen—for, with all her self-consequence, Dinah had no knowledge of any town larger than the little port at which Mr. Bentley and Gillian had landed; but imagination ran so far ahead of her memory, that she really began to believe that all the books she had heard her young ladies read, and all the places she had heard described by the females of the household, were absolutely a part of her own experience.

"Now," said Dinah, eying the shawl, "if I only knew how dem niggers twisted 'em up, it'd be ebery ting. I'se got dem ear-rings Miss Sarah guv me when she was married; but how to pucker dis consarn into a turban beats me."

While she was speaking, Dinah began to fold the shawl diagonally and lay it in broad plaits, which she prepared to bind over her silvered wool.

"Now," she said, laying the folds across her lap, and fishing up a little cracked looking-glass from the depths of her chest, which she fastened between the rafters that sloped over her—"now if I kin only get the kink on it, the chil' 'ill have a waitin'-maid such as ain't found every day. Golly, them's um! them's um!"

Here Dinah gave the shawl a twist, gathered the ends in a knot over her left temple, and really stumbled upon the very method of folding a Madras kerchief into a turban, except that she left the corner behind flying loose; and the shawl, being too voluminous, gave an enormous size to her head, while the ends swept over her shoulders like a pair of wings.

But this exaggeration only increased Dinah's triumph. She gave a satisfied glance into the glass, and drawing forth a gorgeous calico dress from the chest, proceeded to

array herself, as she muttered—"Like de lilies ob de field dat Nebuchadnezzer talked 'bout."

But just as Dinah had clasped the gown at her throat with a huge red glass brooch that had all the brilliancy of twenty carbuncles to her, and was fluttering around the broken glass, with her head on one side and her hands expanded in solemn admiration, a suppressed giggle broke from the stairs, followed by Lizzie's voice, exclaiming—"Oh, golly! oh, golly! ain't we fine! Lor! lor! hi! hi!"

Whereupon old Dinah seized the flaring candle, stick and all, with both hands, and would have sent it after the sound. But, recollecting the open chest, she concluded to disrobe and lock up her treasures, philosophically muttering that "she could lick that imp ob Satan any time; but to leave that chist unlocked was a tempter to providence that she couldn't think on."

The next morning, as soon as Martha's various duties were performed to her own satisfaction—by no means an easy task, for she was an orderly little body—she took refuge in her chamber for the purpose of searching her bureau-drawers and bringing to light any treasures they might contain.

The strongest desire of her heart was to find something which might be converted into a garment fit for Gillian's grand party—it never occurring to the innocent soul that she would be guilty of the extravagance of purchasing a dress for that special purpose. She pulled out a variety of dresses which had belonged to her mother and her aunt, originally of pretty material, but so faded from long years of unfolding, and so old-fashioned in form, that there was little hope to be found in them.

As she surveyed the scant skirts and contracted sleeves, Martha's heart rather sank within her, but still she did

not quite despair. Laying the incongruous pile aside for some farther consideration, she took out of their hiding-places various little articles of jewellery which she possessed, turning them over somewhat hopelessly when she remembered Gillian's wealth in that line.

A fashionable lady would have smiled at the care with which Martha treasured her few valuables. But the old-fashioned brooch and quaint necklace were almost sacred in her eyes, for they had belonged to her aunt of whom she had heard so much, but who had died far away from that quiet old homestead long before the young girl's remembrance.

While she was thus engaged, she heard Dinah's slip-shod patter upon the stairs, and hastened to call her in that she might consult with her upon that all-important subject to every feminine heart.

The jewellery in Dinah's eyes was every thing that could be desired; but about the party dress she was not quite certain, and stood with her head on one side doubtfully.

"As for the jew'lry, there isn't no dubitation: but I isn't quite so sartin 'bout the dress. There's that ar pink gown, I 'member Miss Sarah brung that from York, but that's sich a heap o' years ago—least ways you mought try it on."

Martha acted upon the suggestion; she had gone through the operation a hundred times in her childish days, but now the scant skirt and short waist made her laugh till the tears came into her merry eyes.

"Why, Dinah, I look like an umbrella half-shut up," she exclaimed, ruefully; and for once Dinah had no answer to make.

Luckily for her feelings, she perceived at this instant that Liz had crept into the room and was watching the

operation with eyes and mouth wide open. The unfortunate damsel betrayed her presence by an involuntary exclamation which escaped her at the sight of her young mistress' grandeur.

"Oh, ki! Missy, ain't you splenderiferous! Oh, you is—ki!"

Dinah made a dart at her grand daughter, but her stiff limbs were no match for Lizzy's powers of locomotion, and the "little limb" was safe down-stairs by the time the irate Dinah reached the door.

"No, you don't," she shouted, snapping her fingers, bold from a sense of security. "Mean old nigger, anyhow, if you is my granny. Ki!"

"You Liz," shouted Dinah, "ef them dishes ain't washed when I git down-stairs, I'll straighten your wool as if it'd been hackled a week, mind dat now."

"Woolly yourself," retorted Liz; "old nigger!" but hearing Dinah on the stairs, she took refuge in the pantry and began a great clatter among the dishes, spattering the clean floor without the slightest remorse, and pretending to sing, though there was a quiver in her voice and desperation in her industry.

"Never seed such a limb of Satan," ejaculated Dinah, as she returned to the chamber; but Martha took the contest as a thing of course, especially as she was quite certain that Liz could defend herself without help; and that the old woman loved her grand child far too well for fear of any real cruelty.

"I'se like to ask a question, young Misses," said Dinah, solemnly.

"What do you call me that for?" Martha asked.

"I knows our sitistation better than you does, Miss Martha," replied Dinah, with dignity; "'tain't likely a

pusson like me is gwine to be obstrusive down in York. But I wants to know what complacity I'm a gwine in ?"

"What capacity ?" Martha asked, doubtfully.

"In course, Misses ! Miss Gillian hab a lady's maid, and I spect you ort to be as good as she."

Now the idea of Dinah's setting up for a lady's maid struck Martha as very ludicrous, although her little feminine vanity contemplated the idea with sufficient complacency.

"It would be more dignified," she said, struggling between a smile and a consciousness of her own importance. "Would you like to be my maid, Dinah ? Is that what you are aiming at ?"

"Seems to me it would be more proper, Misses ; I'se had a husband, in course ; he want much 'count, nohow, and 'tain't no use letting our little secrets out o' de family ; and widders make de best ladies' maids I 'spect on account of der 'sperience."

"Of course," Martha said, smiling, for Dinah's husband had always been regarded by her as a somewhat mythical personage.

Now the chest came into Dinah's mind again, and she deemed it a proper moment to drag that portion of her desires into the conversation.

"There ain't nothin' like havin' ebery ting ready," she remarked. "I'se powerfully glad 'bout havin' that chist of mine."

"Oh, Dinah, you can't take that horrid old thing !" exclaimed Martha, aghast.

"I'se travelled, young Misses," replied Dinah, sententiously, perceiving her advantage, and determined to follow it up ; "and I knows de world—ain't gwine to hav'

no stuck-up city niggers laffin' cause we hain't got 'coutrements enough."

Martha deemed it prudent to say no more, being well acquainted with the old woman's obstinacy, and trusting that her father's influence would dissuade her; while Dinah chuckled inwardly at the success of her scheme, and rose to such a state of self-complacency that she straightway seized the opportunity of giving her young mistress a short lecture.

"Law, I knows dem fine folks! their airs 'll profound you, honey; but I've seen Miss Sarah do it, and I can construct you. Now thar's the curchey—kind o' this way."

She pulled up her dress, revealing her trim ankles, and made a bobbing salutation, which set Martha off into a fit of laughter that was loudly echoed from the stairs—Miss Liz had gained courage enough to steal again upon the scene of action.

"Dat cuss—darned free nigger!" cried the irate Dinah, not daring to vent her wrath upon her mistress; and away she ran with astonishing agility downstairs and out of the house, just in time to see Miss Lizzy fly across the cabbage-patch, and take refuge on the top of a wood-shed where she could not reach her.

"I'll fix you, sis, wait and see," she gasped, while Liz, between fear and exultation, was chattering like a monkey on her perch, "I'll larn ye de 'spects due yer olders!"

Lizzy turned one hand into a tube, and, putting it to her lips, shouted, "Ki—ki!" at which Dinah seized a bean-pole and made various unsuccessful pokes at her, but the damsel evaded them, and seemed to enjoy the sport so much that the old woman was forced to give it up and retire in grim ferocity.

CHAPTER XXII.

MARTHA'S TRIP TO NEW YORK WITH HER MAID DINAH.

At length the day arrived on which Martha Hart was to make her entry into the great world. The hour was so early that you could scarcely see a streak of rose in the east; nothing but a pale flush, which shone like a smile across the apple trees dripping with dew, and the purple lilac plumes that crowned the bushes in front of the house.

They had taken breakfast by candle-light—a usual custom in that thrifty household; so there was sadness, but none of that dreary look of discomfort which usually accompanies a departure at early dawn.

Every thing was ready: Martha's compact trunk and band-box, in its calico case, with a basket filled with cakes, a wedge of cheese, and some dried beef, stood together, ready for the wagon, to which the hired man was "hitching up his horses" back of the house.

Dinah, that subtle politician and strong-minded woman, had prevailed on the chest question, and sat upon her property, grim and triumphant, like a general in the midst of a victorious encampment. By her side stood Lizzy, rubbing both sets of knuckles into her eyes, and only taking them away, when Dinah became unbearably pathetic, to shake off the drops and plant them on duty again.

There was a certain tenderness in Dinah's injunctions that made all Lizzy's better nature overflow, like a pool

in which a stone has been cast, but which Dinah held in check, ashamed of such ignoble weakness.

Daniel Hart stood by the window, with his daughter clinging to his arm. He was very grave, even sad, at the thought of her departure. Never yet had it been well with those of his family who went forth from that quiet homestead into the bustling world. He could date poor Hetty's pale cheeks, and Sarah's uneven spirit, from the time of their return from the city where his only child was so eager to hasten.

"You will write to me very soon, child?"

"Yes, father. Oh, I am almost sorry to go! Only say one word, and I will stay at home and send for Gillian to visit us this summer instead."

"No, no: your mind is set on going, and it will not be kind to disappoint your cousin. Come back with the same honest, light heart you take away, and I don't care."

"Why, what do you mean, father? of course I shall, and lighter too, for I shall have seen the world."

Daniel Hart shook his head. The past, which was ever uppermost in his mind, brought before his sight two girlish faces, both handsome, yet totally unlike in their loveliness. He recollected those two faces, so changed by sickness, toil, or sorrow, he never knew which, that those who loved them best would scarce have recognized his sisters again.

"Well, well, we shall see," he said, half-aloud. "Only come back as wholesome and happy as you are now, and I shall be satisfied."

Martha's head drooped upon his arm, and for a few moments they stood in silence, each occupied with thoughts different as though an ocean had rolled between them.

Meanwhile Dinah was busy giving her last directions to the youthful Liz, who stood, with her hair in wild commotion and her eyes rolling incessantly, confused by the varied orders which the old woman poured volubly forth.

"Ye sees, Liz, dis is de most 'portant 'vent ob yer resistance; you's gwine to hab de control ob dis 'stablishment; for any pusson dat comes to help wash and sich like, 'ill only be supernumerums. Now, Liz, mind what I tells you; get de dinners good, don't nibble at de doughnuts, and don't stick your fingers in de cream and 'suade 'em it's de cat."

"Oh, I didn't, never!" ejaculated Liz, with her most innocent face.

"That ain't neither here nor thar," replied Dinah, waving her hand majestically; "I isn't retruding de past: I'se counselin' for de futur.' Be a good gal, and de Lord 'ill bless you! Ef any o' them ornary niggers at de corner 'quires about me, jest say I hab gone to visit Miss Bentley, down in York—dat's all."

"Yes, Dinah," faltered Liz, quite awed by the grandeur of this last announcement.

"And now, Liz, I'se goin' to trust a solumcholy duty to you."

"Oh, my!" groaned Lizzie. "Don't!"

"Yes, I is, chil'; and I hopes you'll be wordy on it, little as you is," repeated Dinah, rising majestically from her chest, and fitting the heavy key into the padlock, which opened with a clang.

"Yes, I'se gwine to trust to your 'scretion, Liz, and gib into yer own hans de 'heritance ob yer forefaders, though what der was on 'em 'sides de indervideral afore yer wasn't of no 'count, any how!"

Here Dinah lifted the lid of her chest and drew forth

the black tea-pot, the pewter cream-cup, and an old white satin slipper, which she sat reverently down while securing the clamps of her chest again.

"Now, Lizzie," she said, remounting her throne, and wielding the slipper as if it had been a symbol of authority, while the cream-cup and its companion lay in her lap—"now, Lizzie, ye sees dese tings: dey 'longed to yer grandad when he was a likely young nigger, an' had de honor ob marryin' de indervideral as is afore yer. Dat is, dey was de settin' out she brought to him wid her fair self, as he wud say when he had drunk up the valley of a day's washin' in strong whiskey afore we detired to our connuberal couch. Liz, yer grandad wud drink, but he alers did it like a gemman, and dat's why I rev'rentializes his mem'ry as I dus. Now, Liz, I prizes dese sacrum tings for de sake ob de dead and berried; for when he lay in dem delirum trumphants dat tuk him off, I 'ministered his last drink out of dis 'dentical cup. Oh, Lizzie! it was a solumneous moment when he guv up de ghost!"

"Oh, don't—don't!" cried Liz, screwing the two little black fists into her eyes, and writhing to and fro. "It scares me to hear about dead folks and their ghosts!"

"Be imposed, Lizzie—be imposed; it is sich tings as makes de soul de more fit for de glory ob hebben. Dere he lay on his pillar, wid both eyes wide open; an' ses he, 'Dinah;' an' I said—

"'My lub.'

"Den he say agin, 'Dinah;' and I say, 'What is 'em, honey?' Den he says agin, 'Dinah, do yer lub me?' and ses I, 'Yes, Jube, I lubs yer yet, if yer does drink ter much; for I 'members ole times, Jube;' and den, Liz, de tears choke me, an' I coul'n't say de rest as I wanted ter.

"When yer grandad sees dat, he ris up on his elber, and ses he—

"'Dinah, kiss me!' an' I kiss 'em. Den he ses, 'Dinah, kiss me 'gin,' an' I kiss 'em 'gin. Den, Liz, he fell back and die wid a smile on him count'nance."

"Oh! oh!" sobbed Lizzie; "poor grandad—poor, ole grandad!"

"Ole!" exclaimed Dinah, indignantly. "Ole! Jube wasn't but just a grown man when he died, an' never would a been of no 'count, no how; so hush up an' 'tend to what I'se a sayin' 'bout dis 'portant trust. Dis cup an' de tea-pot, 'memorations of my connuberal ferlicity, I'se gwine ter guv you to keep, an' I want you to be faithless."

"Oh, I will—I will," sobbed Lizzie. "I hope ole Scratch 'll get me by the wool if I don't."

Here Lizzie held out her reverential hands, and Dinah placed the precious relics therein, keeping the slipper for another lecture.

"Now, Liz, you see dis shoe: it 'longed ter Miss Sarah arter she was married. I 'spect she'd took 'em inter de house ob Satan, an' danced in 'em by de mark on de side; but dey was left ahind when she went 'broad, an' I tuk 'session. Now, Liz, when we gits inter de wag—de carriage I means—yer take dis white shoe and shie it arter us jes as far as yer kin fling. Does yer comprehension, Liz?"

"Yes, yes—I know it's luck; I'll do it, golly! Won't I guv it a shie! Never ye fear, granny!"

"I'se 'joiced to see yer can comprehensionate 'structions," said Dinah, adding the satin slipper to the relics which Lizzie huddled together in her arms. "Now, Liz——"

But that moment the rattle of wheels came round the house, and Martha ran to the door, crying out nervously,

"Oh, Dinah, the wagon is ready," and turning to her father, she flung both arms around his neck and wept aloud.

"Hollo, hurry up!" shouted the hired man, driving the wagon round with a dash, and cracking his whip at Liz.

Liz gave a leap and a cry, stumbled, tried to recover herself, and fell crash upon the relics of her grandmother's domestic felicity. There she lay flat upon the stoop, with those treasures crushed under her, and her great, wild eyes turned imploringly on Dinah, who stood above her in speechless wrath. Liz made an effort to get up and scamper away, but she only whirled over and gathered herself into a dusky ball, from which a pair of scared eyes rolled in every direction.

While Dinah's eyes were turned away for an instant, the frightened creature began to feel for the broken pieces. First she fished out a fragment of the tea-pot, with the handle broken in two, which she tucked under herself again instantaneously. Then she drew forth the milk-cup, and her poor features began to tremble like a jelly between fear and fun, for it was crushed into a pewter cocked-hat, and the sight brought a giggle into her groans. But Dinah, instead of flying into a rage, as Martha had expected, stood perfectly silent, looking down upon the culprit with a solemn gravity that made Liz creep backward till the walls of the house stopped her progress; then starting wildly up, she gave one leap round the corner and disappeared, like a frightened hound, bearing the pewter relic with her, but leaving the crushed tea-pot behind.

"I didn't go to do it. It dropped," she shouted back.

Dinah looked after her without a movement of the face.

"Why, Dinah," said the young mistress, suppressing a laugh, while the tears still trembled in her eyes, "you take it like a Christian. I thought you would have been furious."

Dinah turned solemnly toward her, and, giving both hands a gentle spread, replied:

"'Tain't no use—I can't find no words to 'spress my feelin's. Preachin' couldn't do 'em justice," and, folding her arms, Dinah sat quietly down on her chest, and even moved aside meekly when the man came to lift it into the wagon. She really had no language in which to express her indignation.

Daniel Hart lifted his daughter's trunk into the wagon, settled the basket of eatables under the seat, and came back to the porch again.

"Come, darter, every thing is ready," he said, looking sorrowfully into his child's face.

She would have thrown her arms around him again, but he lifted her gently into the wagon, put a little black wallet into her hands with a whisper to make herself fine as the best of 'em, and turned away.

Dinah clambered up the hind-wheel rather indignant that she also was not lifted to her place, and, seating herself grimly on the chest, was ready at any moment to enter upon the fashionable career which she felt to be her destiny.

Just as they were driving off, a white satin slipper came flying after them, and the face of naughty Liz was thrust round the corner.

After the slipper came a half-scared shout of,

"Good-by, granny—good-by, and luck," finished off by,

"Oh! golly, golly, now won't I have my own way?—oh! won't I?"

Dinah only heard the good-by, and her old heart melted when she saw the shoe flying toward her like a bird of promise, so she deigned to wave her hand.

Martha looked sadly back so long as her father could be seen in the porch; then she had another good cry, and was inconsolable so long as any familiar object remained in sight.

After a time Martha's spirits rose almost as buoyant as before. She chatted gayly with the farmer, and laughed heartily at Dinah's words of wisdom, for the old woman was in one of her most oracular moods, and delivered her opinions freely upon every possible subject.

It was afternoon when they reached the river, where they found the small steamer lying.

As Martha was passing along the dock, she found herself face to face with John Downs, the young man who had driven her uncle and cousin to her father's house, and who, in truth, had chanced that way more than once since. The young girl blushed like a rose at this encounter.

"Well, if it ain't Miss Hart!" he exclaimed, flushing up to the temples with a bashful joy, which made his brown face really handsome. "Won't you shake hands with a fellow? How's your father and that handsome cousin of yours?"

"All well," Martha said, extending her hand, which he grasped with unconscious force in his strong fingers. "Are you going down the river?"

"Well, yes," he said, hesitatingly; "I don't exactly ——"

"I am going to New York to visit my cousin."

"And I am going to York, too," he replied, brightening up wonderfully.

"I say, Downs," said one of the men, approaching at that moment, "you're a-goin' to Sing Sing, ain't you?"

"No, I'm going to York."

"Why you said yesterday——"

"'Tisn't of the least consequence what I said yesterday. I say now I'm going to the city."

Before an hour was over, they were comfortably established on the deck of the steamer, and gliding smoothly out into the river.

Martha and John Downs stood by the cabin door in pleasant conversation; while Dinah had established herself on her chest, spreading her skirt carefully over the huge padlock, and looking grimly at every one who happened to approach her. It was some time before she could feel really at ease concerning the safety of her possessions; and it was not until the captain assured her that he would himself keep his eye upon them, that she could be induced to stir from her perch long enough to see the cabin.

It was well for Martha's peace of mind that she knew little of the world, and that no other passengers were on board, or Dinah's attire might have caused her some uneasiness. The old woman had arrayed herself in a skirt of pressed flannel, below which peeped out a quilted petticoat; above all was a gown of red merino, fastened by a broad, green ribbon; and on her head she wore a huge coal-scuttle bonnet, miraculously trimmed and decorated with a long, green vail that was drawn on one side, and flaunted like a streamer in the wind.

She carried a huge bag of eatables—her own private stock—which might have served for a sea-voyage, but

nothing could induce her to believe there was more than enough—indeed she had great fears that they might fall short, and suffer shipwreck and famine on that perilous voyage. "Besides," she reflected, "if there's any left, Miss Gillian 'll be mighty glad to eat a hum-made pie. 'Tain't likely them fangled city niggers feed her with sich like dainties as her mother was brought up on."

After these arguments had been repeated once or twice, Martha gave up the contest; and Dinah, triumphant as usual, took full charge of the commissary department, only disturbing the young people now and then with offers of sandwiches and drop-cakes, which they invariably refused.

In fact, it breaks my heart to record it, but young Downs and Martha, much to Dinah's disgust, always selected those corners of the deck most remote from her chest and the best sheltered angles and bulwarks. Once that very correct woman was scandalized by the momentary glimpse of a plump, brown hand clasped in that of the young farmer—a hand so marvellously like that of her young mistress that, in her position as chaperone, she felt it her duty to step down and see what it was all about. But, when she reached that quarter of the deck where the young people had been, Martha was leaning demurely over the bulwarks, looking for the rose-tints that always settled on the river at sunset, she had been told. As for young Downs, he stood a couple of yards off, with both arms folded behind him, examining the make of the steamer, as if he had been a ship-builder, and intended to carry off her model in his mind.

Dinah was not quite satisfied with this state of things, and sniffed the air in a disaffected way, resolved to be more vigilant in her watch. Firm in this virtuous resolve,

she was looking for a seat, when one of the sailors mounted on her chest, and began sacrilegiously to beat his heels against its front till the padlock rattled again.

Dinah could not stand this, but darted off on a short run to dislodge the enemy.

Directly after Dinah had retreated, Downs also became curious to watch imaginary rose-tints settle on the river, and drew close to Martha's side, searching for them in her downcast eyes. The young fellow was somewhat troubled in his mind about several matters, and, being a frank, generous soul, spoke out like a man as he was.

"You have got a rich uncle down in York, Miss Martha?"

How did the fellow find out her name was Martha? Had she told him because Miss Hart sounded so formal?

"Yes," she answered, with a little sparkle of pride, "I believe uncle is very rich indeed. They tell me he lives in splendid style. Gillian has a carriage and footman, and every thing all to herself; the house is large enough for a hotel, and only two of them; besides——"

"And plenty of beaux visit there, I suppose—handsome young fellows, who dress like lords, and talk like books?" questioned the young man, in a dissatisfied way.

"Oh, I think it very likely. Gillian is beautiful, and loves company."

"And you—do you love that kind of company, Miss Martha?"

"Me? Oh, indeed! how can I tell? I, who never in my life saw a man that looked like a lord and talked like a book, except it may be my Uncle Bentley."

"But you will meet those men at your uncle's; nothing is more likely."

"Well, what then? I only hope they will be half as nice as Uncle Bentley, and it will be pleasant enough."

Downs took off his hat and began to wave it to and fro before his face, which was hot with uneasy, jealous thoughts. What chance had he—a rough, homespun farmer—against the people this young girl would soon be thrown among? It seemed a desperate venture; but he was brave as well as honest. The love which filled his heart left its fire on his cheek, and its tenderness in his voice, but it was prompt as truth.

"One word, Miss Martha, before we part; for the smoke which rises yonder comes from New York, and that which seems a forest of dead trees, away off, is the shipping you have heard of. One word, and then, come what will, I have acted like an honest man, and said my say. I love you with my whole heart. Have I any chance against those men who will swarm around you like humming-birds about a wild honeysuckle?"

Martha was silent. She had given one little start and drawn a quick breath at his first words, and now stood, in a tumult of mute bliss, gazing on the water. It was not sunset; but rose-tints, brighter than the sky ever sent, danced over the waves, and all the depths were rich with the purple glow which first-love casts over every thing.

"Will you not speak to me?" whispered the young man, touching her hand—"will you not speak to me?"

"I cannot," she answered, in a deeper and sweeter whisper—"I cannot. My heart is too full. The very air makes me giddy."

He stooped down and looked into her eyes. Her face was close to his, and he saw her lips tremble, like the leaves of a red rose when the dew drops away from its heart

But, for the universe he could not have kissed those lips, or gazed long into those troubled eyes. He would as soon have shot a dove on its nest. No; a coarser man might have been tempted to these things by her fresh youth; but he only took her hand softly in his, and they stood trembling together, while the sunset stole pleasantly over them, brightening the distance with gold.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DOUBLE PROPOSAL.

Some weeks had passed since Gillian's visit to Mrs. Ransom when she had first met Woodworth. In those weeks she had become more restless than ever. Her seasons of fitful sadness came on more frequently. Her cheerfulness sometimes rose to excitement; then for days together she would float away into a state of dreamy happiness that had no visible cause, but which brought all the rich poetry of her nature to the surface.

Love is the mission of womanhood; and when it finds a first expression, either in feeling or in sound, that seems originality which almost every true heart has tasted from the time of Eve down to the nineteenth century.

I do not say that Gillian knew that the sweet thoughts and yearning wish for sympathy which possessed her sprang from the quick unsealing of her heart; but Mrs. Ransom was more keen of sight, and these mutations in the character of her protégé gave her great anxiety. Why she should regret this evident growth of love in the heart

of that young girl it seemed impossible to determine. It may be that she felt some responsibility flow back to herself from the fact that Gillian had met Woodworth for the first time under her roof, and that more than once during the last month they had, by a sort of intuition, encountered each other in their morning visits to her. These visits were sure to end in a ramble through the grounds, during which it always fell out that the elder lady was, for a few moments at least, left to solitary meditation; while Woodworth lured Gillian off to search for sweetbriar among the thickets, or found some object of interest on the shore.

One day the two stood together on the ledge of rocks which lay within sight of the library window, to which Mrs. Ransom had retired with an uncomfortable consciousness that she was one too many in that morning ramble. Evidently her retreat had not been noticed, or her absence regretted; for her visitors stood together on the shelf of rock, surrounded by the dew and freshness of morning, with one of the loveliest prospects in the world before them, yet so evidently unconscious of every thing but their two selves, that the smiling scene might have turned to a desert and they would not have regarded the change.

Mrs. Ransom sighed heavily as she looked upon them—sighed till her breath seemed a moan; then, wearily turning away, she lifted one hand to her forehead, drew it over her eyes, and, lo! the tears flowed against it in great, heavy drops.

Why did Julia Ransom cry so bitterly? That stately man was her friend—a dear old friend with whom common pursuits and many a bright tie of thought had bound her; and Gillian, ah! there was no doubt in it—she loved the bright girl as only a woman so lonely and so endowed can

love the beautiful and wayward of her sex. Why was she sad, while, standing there in her proud loneliness, she gazed out upon that picture of growing affection? Was it possible that she loved Woodworth herself? There would seem to be nothing so very unreasonable in the idea; for Julia was a fine woman still, gifted with the best elements of beauty, of mobile features and an expression on which the thought beamed before it was uttered. The disparity in their ages, too, was not so very great; and in character those two persons were so much alike that the only wonder was they had not long since been declared lovers.

Yet her look did not bespeak this state of things. There was neither anger nor jealousy in the tearful glances she cast upon the lovers; but the pathos of a deep, deep regret filled her eyes and trembled around her mouth while she walked to and fro, moaning with unconscious pain, but still keeping that group upon the rocks in sight.

And a beautiful picture it was! Woodworth was speaking: sweet and proudly humble were his words. You could tell that by the stoop of his head and the position of his stately person as he bent toward Gillian, who lifted her eyes to his with the earnestness of a child, while her hands clasped themselves in a mass of scarlet roses which he had just gathered for her from a flower-bed that sloped toward the river.

Julia was not near enough to see the color of that fair, oval cheek, to which the red flowers seemed to have lent their richness; nor could she discern the expression which came to those eyes—the terror and delicious wonder that looked for an instant into his face and then vailed itself beneath those soft, golden-brown lashes. No, no; to have witnessed that would have been to reveal all the force and

earnestness of a love that few human beings are ever privileged to know, at least on this side the grave.

It was, perhaps, because Julia felt how all-prevailing the love of two such persons must prove that she looked upon it with those evidences of anxiety. Perhaps she thought of her own isolation; and that true heart, warm and romantic as ever beat in a human bosom, cast back upon itself during the best part of a life, was thrilled with self-pity by all the waste she found there.

I cannot tell what were the feelings which gave rise to those tears, but surely no unworthy or selfish grief had place there; for after a little she wiped the drops from her eyes, and a heavenly smile swept the clouds from her face. She sat down upon the little veranda, to which her library opened, and watched the picture on the ledge with a new and more gentle interest.

With what sweet humility the proud girl bowed her head and listened! How earnest, how bright with tenderness, his face shone out as it bent toward her! All her limbs must have trembled, for, one by one, she dropped the roses around her feet, leaving her white hands clasped and her eyes downcast, as if some sweet thanksgiving were singing at her heart, and she was afraid he might guess at the hidden joy.

Gillian scarcely seemed tall then; her figure drooped like a flower on its stalk when the dew is heavy: at last she looked around as if her strength were giving way. Just below them, along the shelf of the rock, fleeces of moss had been transplanted from the woods, and lay in cushions, soft and rich as those in an oriental seraglio; aye, richer, for the morning sunshine embroidered their delicate green with gold, and the night dew trembled over them like diamonds. Over this moss some of Gillian's

roses had fallen, and when she sat down their fragrance was all around her. So it should have been for an hour like that—the one brief hour of perfect bliss which a poor mortal knows sometimes in a lifetime, and learns to look forward to the heaven that must be so much like it ever after.

Was Julia Ransom thinking of the one hour in her own life so much like that; or, had all such joy been a stranger to her? I cannot tell, for she never spoke of herself. You only knew that she had felt and suffered by the words that thrilled you with pain or tenderness when she wrote. A woman endowed like her was not likely to unvail her heart. If you saw it through the mists of a high thought, it was all you could hope to learn of the life which lay enshrined within the glory of her frame. I do not know of what she was thinking; but, as Woodworth threw himself along the moss, at Gillian's feet, and gathering up one of the roses, carried it, blushing with kisses, from his lips to hers, Julia arose, with a faint shadow still around her eyes, and walked toward them.

She saw the color rush up to Gillian's neck as her footsteps sounded on the rock. As for Woodworth, he half rose, and held out his hand, challenging her congratulations with a triumphant smile. Julia shook her head with a touch of sadness; her fingers were cold as he clasped them, but she bent lovingly over Gillian and kissed her on the forehead.

Then the warm scarlet rushed over the young girl in a torrent of blushes, and tears of beautiful joy sparkled in her eyes.

"Now," said Woodworth, pressing his lips on Mrs. Ransom's hand, "now my happiness is rounded: without you, our best friend, nothing is complete. Do not look

sad; we have learned to love each other in both loving you."

"Oh, flatterer," said Mrs. Ransom, gently; "in a little while you will say it was because Gillian here was like me that you sought her."

"And so she is. The same warm heart—the same generous charity—the same great faults; for you have no little ones, upon my life, Mrs. Ransom: it is because she is like you in these things that I love her."

"Do not flatter," said Mrs. Ransom, looking wistfully at the young face before her. "If there is any resemblance, it lies in the affection we feel for each other."

"And in a general cast of thought which struck me from the first. I really should think Miss Bentley had lived with you all her life."

"And so she has, the best portion of it," said Gillian, gratefully, "for if life is measured by thoughts and feelings, I have only learned how to exist here: all other places seem distasteful to me now."

"But your father?" said Julia, a little reproachfully. "Surely life is sweet with him."

Gillian felt the gentle rebuke, and her eyes fell.

"Oh, I had forgotten my father—you know how I love him. Indeed, who could help it? But I do not know how it is—he sometimes seems to bear my presence with pain; and when I speak out the thought that comes uppermost, or feel more than usually happy, he shrinks away from me and goes off alone, as if there existed something in my words or manner that he could not reconcile himself to. What is it, dear Mrs. Ransom, that lies between my father and his child?"

"I should say," answered Woodworth, thoughtfully, "that it was a memory of something he has loved and

lost. Was your father very much attached to your mother, Gillian? I mean, did he regard her with more than ordinary love?"

"Indeed I think so, and the more because he seldom mentions her. But how could he help it? You should only hear Uncle Daniel when he talks of her. Oh, if she had only lived, I should have loved her entirely with my whole heart, as I love you, Mrs. Ransom. I know that she was a woman to worship—to be proud of—for once my father told me so."

Mrs. Ransom sat perfectly still, looking into the distance. When Gillian uttered the last words, she rose and walked toward the river, as if some thing on the shore had caught her attention; but half-way down she paused and gathered some sweetbriar, which she brought back with her and quietly divided between the lovers.

"You were speaking of your father," she said. "What will he think of the pledge you have just given, Gillian? Remember you are an only child, and the heiress of great wealth."

"My father loves me, and he does not care for any thing else," said Gillian, crimson with dread that there was something in Mrs. Ransom's words which might wound the sensitive pride of her lover. "There are things that he respects more than wealth, and that is not wanting where genius exists. You do not know my father, Mrs. Ransom, if you think that the ability to earn fame, the energy which *has* earned it, will not meet even his ambition."

Woodworth sat watching her embarrassment, and smiled when it broke into enthusiasm. He was really too proud at heart to think of Mr. Bentley's wealth, either as an incentive or impediment to his suit with the heiress.

So long as she possessed refinement, education, and those qualities that could awake a heart not easily touched like his, he had thought of nothing else. With a just appreciation of the position which his own self-directed genius had already won, it never struck him to feel any inequality which property could produce. Feeling himself a fair match for Mr. Bentley's daughter, he had frankly offered himself, and as frankly been accepted. He had visited at Mr. Bentley's house, and knew himself to be a favorite with its master, who, unlike the lower class of millionaires, was a man of fine taste and unusual erudition. That a character like Mrs. Ransom's would object to him as a son-in-law had never for a moment entered into his calculations.

With Gillian herself, he had been humble as true affection can make a proud man. Her youth and her singular attractiveness, compared to his riper years and those harsher traits that fasten on a man who works his way to position, impressed him almost with hopelessness. Had any one told him that there was a woman in the land whose position entitled her to look down upon him, he would have laughed in derision. But he gave to Gillian's bright character what a queen would have failed to win from him—the homage of a profound respect for her womanliness, and of a great love that would have left him bankrupt had she proved unworthy.

"And have you no fear that Mr. Bentley may refuse you his daughter?" said Mrs. Ransom, pressing the subject home with remarkable pertinacity, as if she had resolved to punish them for a moment's forgetfulness of a father's right. "Men like him do not give up their daughters to the first person who asks. He will be taken by surprise."

"Now you are getting unamiable," said Woodworth,

smiling a little constrainedly. "It is the first time that I ever knew Mrs. Ransom fling shadows on a bright hour."

"And have I been so cruel?" said Julia, with a quiver of the lip. "Well, well, I was but thinking how little a parent has of power or control over the destiny of a grown-up child."

"But have you any reason to think that Mr. Bentley will disapprove of the feelings to which you are the sole confidante?" inquired Woodworth, now really anxious. "Have you seen him? Are there any grounds for supposing that he has other plans?"

"Do not be so impetuous, my friend," she replied, smiling. "I have no reason on earth for what I have said. Nothing but over-anxiety, and a little unaccountable nervousness, which makes me seem cross when I really am quite the contrary. As for Mr. Bentley, I have not yet had the honor of an introduction to him, as this dear girl can tell you."

"But it is not his fault," said Gillian, promptly. "I am sure he has been anxious enough to know you, Mrs. Ransom; only it has happened that when he called you have been absent or indisposed. But now I am determined to bring the two people together I love best." Here she caught Woodworth's glance, and shook her head lightly as if to scatter the flood of crimson that rushed over her face. "You see—you see. Well, really this was my entire business here. My father has decided that we are to give a great party, something very superb, which is to honor the introduction of his graceless child into your metropolitan society. You have no idea how many really nice persons have called upon us, and offered all sorts of civilities, since we opened the house; so we are sure to have a crush of people. A dozen ladies of the

first position have offered to keep me in countenance, so I have no lack of chaperones, but I want something more than that: my heart wants a true friend to lean on. So the moment this idea of a chaperone was mentioned, I thought of you and drove over at once."

"And your father?" said Mrs. Ransom.

"Oh, he was delighted; offered to come with me and press the matter, but somehow the fates are against me when he attempts to gain admission to your paradise, and I ventured alone."

"Thank you for it," whispered Woodworth, softly. "I had a feeling that you would be here at this hour, and alone."

Gillian answered something in a low voice; but her eyes followed Mrs. Ransom, who had moved away, apparently attracted by the manœuvring of a sloop that was tacking up the river.

Gillian and Woodworth walked toward her, for the generous girl had her heart in the subject under discussion, and was eager for a reply.

"Oh, my dear madam, do not turn away, for that looks like a refusal to help me preside over this formidable party, and I shall never get along without you," she said, caressingly. "Surely I have asked nothing that should make you so grave."

"Nothing, dear child, that is not both kind and flattering; but I seldom go into fashionable society, or indeed anywhere outside of my own little knot of friends."

"But you will not really refuse me?" cried Gillian, distressed. "Oh, Mr. Woodworth, help me to persuade her; tell her that I am, at any rate, half an orphan, and have no mother to stand by me on this occasion, which will be a very trying one; for though I seem so reckless and self-sustained, it isn't real courage, I assure you—only

a trembling sort of bravado. Persuade her; do, for her forehead is cloudy yet."

Mrs. Ransom turned suddenly with one of those luminous smiles on her face, which always won smiles in return.

"No, Gillian," she said, "you must not ask that; no person living can interpose between us. We are friends, sworn friends remember; and even Woodworth, highly as I prize him, would wrong that friendship in urging a thing which I had forced myself to deny you."

"But you will not deny me?"

"Dear, dear child, give me a little time: remember this is a severe ordeal you propose for a woman who has kept out of the world so long, and I too am a sort of coward in social gatherings of this kind where so many will be strangers."

"'Strangers!' No, indeed, our guests are not so ignorant as that; you are one, dear lady, whose name tells a history. It will be a proud day for my father when he presents you as the dearest and most honored friend of his child; as for me, I shall only feel indignant if they do not all worship you for yourself as well as your books."

"My dear, dear child!" Julia broke off and choked back a sob. "There, there, give me a little time, if it is only to think about the dress; one must be very magnificent, you know."

"Yes, yes, I have thought that all over; of course, you must be superb, something grand and queenly; black velvet or crimson."

"What, and the roses in bloom?"

"Oh, I had forgotten: you see how little I am to be trusted. Well, black lace then, with some of these same roses in your hair and on your bosom."

The young girl was so animated, the color came and went so brightly on her face, that Julia became interested in spite of herself; to own the truth, a strong desire sprang up in her heart to attend this party. According to her old habit she turned away and walked alone, evidently under considerable excitement. Directly she came back more quietly.

"But you have an aunt: how will she like this intrusion of a stranger into your household?"

"What, Aunt Hetty? Why she would drop down at the very thought of standing by my side on an occasion like that. You have no idea what a timid, nervous little thing she is. The very sight of a stranger sets her to trembling: it is quite painful to see how she suffers."

"And this is all the companion you have?"

"Not quite; but then my cousin is scarcely a year older than myself, and has been brought up in the country, so that you would be doing her a charity also, for her only female protector just now is an old colored woman, who insists on teaching the proprieties of fashionable life to us both. I wish you could see Dinah in her glory, she is such a character!"

"Well, well! Let us hold a consultation. Suppose you turn this affair into a fancy ball. What say you, Mr. Woodworth?"

"Just the thing. I thought you would suggest something of this kind; a mere party filled up with dancing, flirting, eating and drinking, is at all times a bore."

"A fancy ball!" cried Gillian, sparkling with delight. "And you really will take a part? and you, Mr. Woodworth?"

"Now that I am invited—yes."

"And you, Mrs Ransom?"

"I think—yes, I *will* go."

"Oh, you are so good; and I can tell papa that it is all settled. And now about the characters."

"For me," said Mrs. Ransom, "let it be something grave and quiet, say a nun or sister of charity."

"No, no," cried Gillian, "that will never do. Let it be something stately."

"Well, be it so. A lady of Louis the Fifteenth's court, with powder, patches and brocade. Will that do?"

Mrs. Ransom spoke thoughtfully, and with but little of the animation which the subject might be expected to produce. She gave so much importance to the character she was to assume that both Gillian and Woodworth were surprised.

"And you," said Woodworth, addressing Gillian, "what is your character to be?"

He spoke in a low voice, and Gillian answered him under her breath.

"Any thing that you choose!"

His face flushed with pleasure.

"Let it be Aurora, then, for without you my days would be all darkness."

The eyes which she lifted to his beamed with an expression so beautiful that his heart swelled, and the very breath he drew came laden with exquisite joy.

They stood together silent and happy. Mrs. Ransom had left them suddenly and was walking toward the house. In her presence they could talk on general subjects, but now excess of feeling struck them mute; but it was a silence so delicious that neither had a wish to break it. At last Gillian drew a deep breath, and reaching forth her hand lifted her heavenly face to his.

"Follow her," she said. "Have I been selfish in urging her to join us?"

"Selfish—no. It is better that she should appear in society: no woman living can grace it so well."

"Persuade her of this: and now go."

"Do you weary of me?"

"Weary! how can you think it? But all this makes me dizzy. I will return home without entering the house again."

"And to-morrow?"

"To-morrow, come to my father."

"And after that? Ah, Gillian, this happiness terrifies me; my life seems too full of wealth. God bless you forever and ever, for giving me this one hour."

She drew toward him as a bird of paradise moves in the sunshine. Her eyes shone with love; her mouth trembled like a cherry when the bird that seeks it is near. A goddess smitten with human affections might have looked like Gillian, and been regal still. It is only when love imbues a proud nature like hers with tenderness, that we know how grand a passion it is. Woodworth folded his arm around her waist and drew her to his side.

"Gillian, are you happy?"

"Very happy!"

The words died like fragrance on her lips. He stooped down and gathered them in kisses.

"To-morrow I will ask you of your father, Gillian. Till then I shall doubt the reality of this happiness; I begin to tremble now with a fear of losing you. Promise, Gillian—promise to love me forever."

"Forever and ever!" she murmured.

"Now let me go with you to the carriage."

"No, no, leave me a little time alone!"

He saw that she was faint with emotion, and taking compassion on her went away; not into the house, for he too wished for solitude, but through the grounds into the high road, down which he walked toward the city.

Scarcely an hour had passed since Gillian entered the house, whose balconies were visible from where she sat —one little hour and her whole life had changed. She had for the first time in her existence listened willingly to the passionate love of a strong man—she had stepped upon that ledge of rocks a free woman, and now she was bound in every fibre of her heart, in every wish of her being. The seal of a holy compact burned on her lips, the passionate consciousness of it thrilled her through and through. She sat down and wept like a little child, when his last footstep died on the turf. But the tears she shed were like April rain, and a blossom sprung up in her heart with every drop.

Mrs. Ransom saw her from the window, but forbore to disturb the dreamy quiet into which she had fallen. Indeed she had no wish to move—hardly the power, for the deep feelings of her own nature were in a tumult. She was greatly disturbed by the events of that morning, and while Gillian wept tears of happiness, hard, painful drops gathered in Julia's eyes. Thus smitten by a cold feeling of desolation, she went into her chamber and shut the door.

A few minutes after she disappeared, Michael Hurst came, unannounced, through the front door, which had been left ajar, and entering the library looked around for its usual occupant.

"Not here," he muttered; "I dare say she saw me coming and took herself out of the way. Your poetess hates a drain on the purse as much as common mortals,

and I suppose she fancies I'm on that tack again. By Jove, she'll soon find out that I'm striking for higher stakes than that. She must help me, too, or the game will be a difficult one to play, for the girl is as proud as Lucifer, and unmanageable as a wild bird; but with madam's help all will be easy enough. After all she is a wonderful woman, so earnest and prompt, her thoughts all poetry, her judgment clear and practical. But then such women will think their own thoughts and act their own acts, there is the mischief of it; I hardly dare confide in her yet, not till I have seen this proud girl and tried her temper on the subject. But then how can I see this Gillian alone? She is so hedged in with her pride of station that, with the poor old maid ready to help me in any thing, with free access to the house, backed by Lawrence with the father, I have not in two months been able to get one moment of private conversation with her. By Jove, there she is now, and alone!"

The young man sprang from his seat as he uttered these last words, and clearing the veranda with a bound made his way toward the ledge where Gillian was sitting.

She was too busy with her own pleasant thoughts to remark his approach; and he, with that instinctive respect which forces itself on the most depraved when in the presence of a noble woman, curbed his headlong progress, and almost held his breath when he drew near her.

She was stooping to pick up the roses that had fallen upon the moss, when her heart first leaped to the offered love of Woodworth. Every bud and leaf was precious to her now; and she gathered them up reverently, as if they had been scattered on a sacred altar. For all her wealth she would not have parted with the smallest spray clasped in those trembling hands.

"Miss Bentley!"

Gillian started—clasped her fingers tighter about the roses, and turning her face over one shoulder, saw with impatience that young Hurst stood upon the very moss which was still imprinted by the feet of her accepted lover.

Now this man had rendered himself odious to the young girl: first, by connecting himself with the only misunderstanding that she had ever experienced with her aunt; and again, from the manner in which he had presumed on the partiality of that lady to force himself into familiar relations with the family. True, the introduction and indorsement of Mr. Lawrence, a man of high standing both in the commercial and social world, had reconciled Mr. Bentley to the acquaintance. But Gillian shrunk from it with the quick intuition of a delicate nature. In his manner, and in the words which he sometimes found an opportunity of forcing upon her, there was an attempt at gallantry which irritated her pride. She could understand the petty manœuvres by which he had sought to ingratiate himself into her favor, and held them in gentle contempt.

It was with a sort of terror that, seeing him so near, she arose quickly, and looked around for a path by which she might descend the ledge of rocks.

"Miss Bentley, do not seek to avoid me so pointedly. The happiness of finding you alone for one moment has, perhaps, made me over-bold; but, when the heart is full of one great wish it forgets ceremony. Don't go! Don't turn that sweet face away! Are you afraid of me?"

The quick pride sparkled up from Gillian's heart to her eyes.

"Afraid! No, indeed. What is there for me to fear

from your presence, Mr. Hurst? You came abruptly, and I was startled a little—that is all."

"Oh, if you did but know how I have watched and prayed for this hour!"

"And why, Mr. Hurst? I have seen you almost every day for a month; certainly every day since my cousin, Miss Hart, came to the city."

He looked at her keenly. Had he, indeed, succeeded in making her jealous by his flirtation with the pretty country-girl? Surely that brilliant eye and the curve of her haughty lip was a proof of feminine pique that could spring from no other cause.

He drew close to Gillian, but she stepped haughtily back and shielded her roses from his outstretched hand as if it had been a serpent attempting to creep over them.

"And did you really think my attention to the pretty rustic sprang from any thing but a wish to be near you?" he said, with infinite humility and tenderness in his voice. "You must have seen how entirely my whole heart has been yours since the first time that I saw you in that library yonder, Miss Bentley. Oh, Gillian, no man ever adored a woman as I worship you. Have compassion on me, and listen kindly for this once: I know that I am not your equal, as far as appearances are concerned; but circumstances may bring us nearer to a level—nay, by heavens! they shall!"

"Mr. Hurst, this is wild—worse, it is almost insulting! What, in my whole conduct, has warranted this address?"

She turned, and attempted to pass him; but he stood firm, blocking her progress.

"There is no insult in an honest expression of love," he said, looking almost as haughty as herself. "I have a

right to be heard, and to demand a civil answer, at least. Nay, do not rain down so much scorn from those beautiful eyes! In this country there exist no social distinctions which energy and a strong will cannot overcome. You have money, intellect, beauty. I am neither hideous nor a fool. As for wealth, that is easily earned, and I am as likely to obtain it as another. Why, then, should you look as if a serf were addressing you?"

There was truth in his words, and Gillian felt that her impulsive pride had given him an excuse for prolonging the conversation. She simply moved away from the spot which his presence seemed to desecrate, and, signifying by a bend of her head that he might follow, walked toward the river. There she found an iron garden-chair, and sat down, while he stood before her, pale with internal rage at her coolness, and with drops of perspiration starting to his forehead.

She looked up, quietly, and said, in her usual clear voice,

"Now, Mr. Hurst, I will listen. You say justly the offer of an honest heart can never be considered as an insult. You took me by surprise. I beg your pardon!"

The color came up to his face; he was almost in tears, for he had told the truth. With all the force of his good and evil passions he loved the young girl before him. He loved her, and knew that from her composure and humility there was less to hope than from the angry pride with which she at first received him. His voice was broken, and there was genuine feeling in his words as he spoke again.

"I thank you, Miss Bentley, for this kindness; yet it only gives me an opportunity of repeating more respectfully what I have already said. I love you—with all my

soul and strength I love you! Have you nothing to give in return to a poor fellow who lays all that he has, or hopes for, at your feet?"

Gillian was troubled. Her pure forehead gathered together in a cloud. She thought how terrible a thing it must be to love without return, and her heart thrilled with compassion for a man she could not even like.

"No," she said, with sweet humility, "it would be cruel and wrong to mislead you. I have no feelings that could answer to those you offer. In my whole life I have never regarded you with a thought of love. At this moment you stand higher in my esteem than ever, but it is sorrow, regret, I will not say compassion, that I feel—not love! Forgive me—*do* forgive me, if what I say is painful; but I can only ask you to forget all this, and let us never meet again."

He stood for a moment, gazing upon her face; his own was pale as death—pale and stormy with a strife of passions.

"No!" he said, at last, "we shall meet again, and often. The stake between us two is heavy, and we must not play out our game at a sitting; one thing is certain: you and I must be lovers, or enemies; married, or one of us ruined. But your rejection need not be final. I will not take it as such for your own sake—for your father's sake!"

"Stay!" cried Gillian, lifting her head, and sweeping by him like a goddess, "I have no patience to listen farther; yonder is Mrs. Ransom on the veranda."

"Beware, Miss Bentley, how you make that woman your confidante!" he persisted, following her.

She turned upon him with all the pride of her superb nature.

"Have no fear, sir, that I shall not conceal the degradation of this interview."

The young man fairly ground his teeth in the deadly rage that seized upon him; but she swept forward toward the verandah, where Mrs. Ransom was waiting for her, and, after a few words, went hurriedly to her carriage.

Those few words were very simple and unimportant, but they had a terrible influence on the future; not in themselves, but from the honorable secrecy which Gillian felt bound to maintain regarding the proposal which had been forced upon her.

When Mrs. Ransom inquired, with evident anxiety, what young Hurst had been talking of so earnestly, Gillian answered, vaguely:

"Oh, it was a private affair of his own, in which he wanted my co-operation."

"Which you refused?"

"Of course, dear lady. What can that man and I have in common?—nothing, I am quite sure. But, yourself, what has happened to distress you?"

"Nothing; but, Gillian, the glow of happiness has all fled from your face."

Gillian laid one hand on her heart, and answered, with a beautiful smile,

"But it is here yet. He frighted away my dreams, but not this holy reality."

The carriage drove away. Mrs. Ransom followed it with a long, wistful look, and entered her library again. Here she had expected to find Michael, but the room was empty, and there was no trace of him in the grounds.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MICHAEL HURST CHANGES HIS LODGINGS.

Not three hours after the interview we have described at the Bloomingdale Cottage, Michael Hurst presented himself at the little house in the vicinity of Chatham Square, a place he had visited frequently of late, much to the satisfaction of the two old ladies, who were always charmed into especial good nature by his presence. Indeed, there was a little jealousy between the ancient dames on his account; and Mrs. Nicholson was constantly making little devices to meet him in the hall and hold a few words with him in private before he entered to the presence of the elder lady. Mrs. Frost was greatly scandalized by these flirty proceedings, and frequently took her dependent to task on the subject. Mrs. Nicholson felt this rather as a compliment than otherwise. It was not every old lady of seventy odd who could boast of reprimands for receiving too much attention from a handsome young fellow like Hurst.

Then there was Hetty Hart, Mrs. Frost's niece, who always happened to time her visits with that of the young man, which Mrs. Frost considered very indecorous indeed.

Once, and this Mrs. Nicholson told to Mrs. Frost, as a great secret, she had opened the parlor door suddenly, just to see if Miss Hetty Hart had gone, when she detected that lady at the end of the hall, putting some

bank-bills into Michael's hand. It had troubled her greatly to make out where the money came from; but afterward she learned, from Martha Hart, that Aunt Hetty had sold a meadow lot, inherited from her own mother, and no doubt she was instructing Hurst to put the money out at interest. In fact Hetty had hinted as much, when the subject was touched upon by Mrs. Frost, who felt it to be her duty to regulate these matters among the young people, and see that the reputation of her house did not suffer by Hurst's frequent visits there.

On the day in question the two old ladies had dined, and Mrs. Nicholson was busy putting away the dinner-dishes in a small corner cupboard. First she washed two cups and saucers in an old-fashioned pewter basin, which had belonged to Mrs. Frost's mother before the Revolution; then followed a couple of china pie-plates, with two knives and forks. At last she disposed of a vegetable dish in which Mrs. Frost had covered up four cold potatoes, which she gave Mary Nicholson especial directions to slice up and fry for dinner the next day. With the exception of this household order, Mrs. Nicholson had not heard the sound of Mrs. Frost's voice that day; for, having nothing on earth to talk about, the old lady—unlike some others we could mention—kept silence severely.

Thus Mrs. Nicholson, who was naturally a social old lady, felt even the clatter of the saucers and plates as some sort of company, and continued her occupation as long as possible. But work tardily as she would, the clearing of that small dinner-table must terminate.

At last, Mrs. Nicholson seated herself at the window, and, putting on her spectacles, prepared to mend a stocking which she had taken up earlier in the day. In and out went that bright darning-needle stitch, stitch, up and

down, forming a basket-work of threads, till at last one vigorous pull settled a row of stitches in its place, and she commenced over again.

The monotony made her stolid, and she was on the verge of a nap, when Mrs. Frost rose up in her chair and asked "if she had been dreaming through her after-dinner sleep, or if somebody had really said that Mr. Bentley was going to give a great party, and that Daniel Hart's only daughter had been sent for?"

Mrs. Nicholson brightened up at this opening for a little gossip, and replied, "That it was no dream, but the living truth. Hetty Hart had told them all about it the last time she was at the house; and more than that, Michael Hurst had been invited—indeed Mr. Bentley, who thought the world and all of Michael, had given the invitation with his own lips. Mr. Hurst was going beyond a doubt; for he had asked her to do up a fine shirt and some collars for him, the very last time he was at the house."

Mrs. Frost sat upright in her chair while all this information was innocently imparted by Mary Nicholson, a sure sign that she was interested and not well pleased. She remained quiet till the collars were mentioned, and then her virtuous reprehension broke loose.

"Mary Nicholson, Mary Nicholson, will you never arrive at years of discretion, or are you immoral at heart? I want to know that! Here we are, two lone women, with our yards overlooked by ever so many windows, and you talk of hanging up fine shirts and collars with my wash: what will the world think of proceedings like that? I shouldn't wonder if we have the police magistrates inquiring after our goings-on next. Mary Nicholson—Mary Nicholson, if you have no respect for your own

reputation, remember that I have a character to lose, and ain't going to have it ruined by men's garments flaunting in my yard. Why the very clothes-pins would be scared off the lines. I blush for you, Mary Nicholson."

If Mrs. Frost spoke the truth, two old women were blushing at once, for Mary Nicholson become red through all her wrinkles, and a tear stole softly down from under her spectacles.

"I'm sure I didn't mean any harm," she said, quite meekly; "and I know that Mr. Hurst didn't."

"Mr. Hurst—of course he didn't! Such things never enter a young man's head till some forward young creature brings up the idea. Mary Nicholson, I'll be bound you offered to wash out those things first; now own up and shame the Evil One that tempted you."

"I—I don't just remember how it came about, Mrs. Frost, but I'm sure it wasn't him," murmured Mrs. Nicholson, wiping her eyes with the stocking she was darning. "If there is any blame, of course it belongs to me."

"And that was what you were slipping the square of yellow soap into your pocket for when I sent you to the closet yesterday. I declare, Mary Nicholson, if it wasn't for leaving you alone in the world with no one to look after your ways, I wouldn't keep you in this house another night. Yellow soap and collars indeed!"

Mrs. Nicholson looked a good deal startled, and her hand shook till the darning-needle went quite astray, but she maintained an humble silence; and Mrs. Frost, having relieved her mind, subsided into her chair and fell asleep with a scowl on her face.

Half an hour went by. The old woman of ninety hung her head in sullen sleep; and the old woman of seventy

odd wept over her indiscretions, and wondered meekly if she ever would learn how to behave; while her needle went in and out monotonously as before.

A blow on the street-knocker started the one from her doze, and the other from her work.

"It is his knock, I'm sure," faltered Mrs. Nicholson, looking timidly at her mentor.

"Then I will myself open the door; keep your seat, Mary Nicholson, and don't look so fluttered. The young gentleman's visit is doubtless to me; there is no danger of his making improper suggestions regarding clothes when I am the person to be consulted."

"Ah, Mrs. Frost, you have grown quite young again, and come down-stairs like a girl," cried young Hurst, with forced gayety. "My dear madam, take my arm: you will not find it quite so easy to mount alone. There, now, fancy me your son and lean heavily."

Mrs. Frost did lean heavily, and her old face looked the younger by ten years from a consciousness of his care about her. So, having triumphed over Mary Nicholson by presenting herself leaning on the arm of her protégé, the virtuous indignation that had burned within her died out. She forbore to continue her lecture in the presence of the young man, who was rather surprised by the subdued reception which Mrs. Nicholson gave him.

"And you have not been ill, did you say that, my dear grandmother, nor frightened at any thing, and they have distressed me for nothing? Indeed I never should have forgiven myself. In fact, the pain and self-reproach has been so great that I will not run the chance of suffering it again. Grandmother—Mrs. Nicholson, you must find me a bed somewhere, or I shall never be content about you."

Mrs. Nicholson gave a little start of horror; and Mrs. Frost's head began to vibrate like a pendulum.

"A bed!" ejaculated Mrs. Frost. "A bed!" echoed Mrs. Nicholson.

"Yes; why not? To own the truth, for it is useless attempting to deceive you even for your own good, there has been a murder and robbery within the week, close in this neighborhood. They have quite terrified me; two elderly ladies living together both murdered in their beds as you might have been. Indeed, my dear grandmother, I cannot leave you unprotected at night after that. Don't put yourself out; any thing will do for me."

"There is the little bedroom off the hall," suggested Mrs. Nicholson, timidly; but she was silenced by the indignant voice of Mrs. Frost.

"Mary Nicholson! The hall bedroom, and on this story! Will you never arrive at years of discretion?"

"No, no. Let it be my old room in the attic; nothing else would seem like home. I will be no trouble, but take my meals out."

"And your washing?" said Mrs. Frost, anxiously.

"Oh, that of course. I only came for protection, not to encumber you with any thing. If Mrs. Nicholson can manage to make my bed and bring up a little water once a day, it will be all I desire."

Mrs. Nicholson looked up well pleased with the idea of being made useful; but Mrs. Frost tore her satisfaction up at the roots.

"No, Mr. Hurst, you must allow me to judge of what is proper in my own house. Mary Nicholson is too young."

"You, my dear grandmother! indeed you shall do no such thing."

Mrs. Frost arose in her seat, looked steadily first at Hurst, then at the drooping face of her companion.

"Michael Hurst, has there been a private understanding between you and Mary Nicholson about your coming here? Answer me that."

"A private understanding! No, upon my honor. What an idea!"

"Then you can come, Michael."

Michael cast a side glance at Mrs. Nicholson. Was it possible that there really was some understanding between them?

CHAPTER XXV.

GILLIAN'S CONFESSION.

GILLIAN and her father sat together in the library, a large room opening from the front vestibule, and forming one of a suit of apartments that might have befitted a palace, the ceilings were so high, and the fresco pictures upon them so exquisite as works of art.

Bookcases of dark wood, heavily carved, occupied all those spaces of the wall not broken by the windows on one side, and a broad bay which occupied a large portion of the front. These bookcases were surmounted by bronze busts of the great poets and statesmen that had left the best part of their lives, the thought which never perishes, in the richly bound volumes that gleamed through those crystal doors. The tall windows between were draped to the floor with curtains of heavy crimson

silk, which, drawn back or closed by thick cords and tassels, excluded, or let in the light, as the inmates of that room might desire cheerfulness or solitude. In the recess of the broad bay-window stood an elaborately carved, black marble table, polished like a mirror; an easy-chair and a richly cushioned bench, which swept round the lower woodwork of the window, offering a luxurious seat to any one who loved the gorgeous twilight of the place. Though the window itself was of pure plate-glass, the inner sashes, gorgeously stained with amber, crimson and purple, gave an air of indescribable magnificence to the whole room whenever they were closed over the pure light which shone through the outer glass. This happened very frequently, for at times Mr. Bentley seemed to shrink from the broad day, and seek the gloom of that sumptuous library, as a wounded stag loves the deep hemlock shade.

Sometimes, too, Gillian, the bright, happy Gillian, came like a tropical bird, and indulged her sweet reveries in this rich twilight. Now that her soul was brimful of love—when she knew that answering love flowed back upon her as honey-dew falls upon the leaves—she would gather herself into this silken nest and think over and over again the sweet words he had uttered—the glances that had made every nerve in her frame thrill, and wonder, with pleasant egotism, if any human being were ever so happy before.

It was broad day out of doors, but a luxurious twilight reigned within. Gillian sat upon the silken cushions, dreaming over her sweet fancies; and Mr. Bentley leaned back in the easy-chair close by, reading, or seeming to read, for a leaf of the stained blind was folded back, and

a stream of pure light fell over him and made a path far out on the carpet beyond.

He had forgotten that Gillian was in the room, his reverie was so deep—forgotten every thing in the intense interest excited by the book, which began to tremble in his hand, while a haze crept over his eyes, and he found himself, all at once, unable to distinguish the print, which floated before him like the network of a cobweb.

The slow motion of one hand drawn across his eyes, and a heavy sigh aroused Gillian.

"What is it, father?" she said, sitting upright, and smiling upon him as an infant awakes in the morning. "What is it that makes you sigh so heavily, as if it were sorrow, not joy, which holds your breath?"

Bentley answered her look and her smile, but it was winter meeting spring. In Mr. Bentley's smile there was a quivering sadness that made the heart stand still; in hers, a joy that made it leap.

"Is it the book?" she said, rising and casting a glance over his shoulder. "Ah, I see—one of Mrs. Ransom's novels. No wonder you are sad, papa. I have cried myself ill over those very pages. What power, what passion she throws into every thing, and yet her pathos is so tender, like her voice when she pleads for something! Oh, papa, I wish you could hear her talk!"

"Like this? Does she talk like this?" said Bentley, laying his slender hand on the open page of the book.

"At times, when she is excited or sad; for I do believe this lady writes, as she talks, from unstudied impulse; but usually she is gay, almost joyful; I think she talks nonsense best of all. I never saw exactly such a woman."

"But you like her?"

"Oh, yes! *so* much! It seems to me as if I never really loved till she taught me how."

"Ah!" said Bentley, closing the book and looking searchingly into the glowing face that bent over him, "this acquaintance has sprung into friendship very suddenly. It is not often that a girl of little more than seventeen seeks a companion so much her elder; for the author of this cannot be young: such power and finish renders the idea impossible."

"Yes, papa, but you know I have been always with persons older than myself, and like them best. Young girls are so—so——"

"Well?"

"So full of themselves they will not take time to think of others. I never saw a person—a lady I mean—young or old, who comprehended all I wished or felt till Mrs. Ransom permitted me to visit her."

"Permitted! Why, Gillian, you are growing humble. It was but yesterday you spoke of visiting Mrs. Lawrence, one of the most distinguished ladies of the fashionable world, with something almost like contempt."

"Oh, papa, not that. I was only careless, impatient at the worst; but Mrs. Lawrence is only a rich, fashionable woman, who thinks herself a good judge of style, and talks eternally about her carriage-horses, is delighted when she is mistaken for a Frenchwoman, and wonders why any country can be so vulgar as to have 'Yankee Doodle' for a national air. Indeed, papa, I don't like that kind of person at all."

"Well, well, I am not asking you to like her. She is rather too advanced for a companion to my Gillian. But is there no young lady?"

"None but Cousin Martha Hart that I care a rose-leaf

for; she is honest as steel, and fresh as a violet. Indeed I do love Cousin Matty dearly. I intend she shall make a dozen conquests at our party."

"But to go back where we began, Gillian; this lady author, have you invited her?"

"Yes, papa."

"And she comes, of course. I believe your first party is to be the rage, daughter, so we may depend on this lady."

"I don't know," answered Gillian, thoughtfully: "she promised at one time, but now rather shrinks from the throng that will be here."

A cloud came over the young girl's face—a look of hesitation and distress, which her father observed.

"Well, what is it, child? Is there any thing more about this lady? She seems to have taken a strange hold on you."

Still Gillian blushed and trembled. Her eyes were downcast; her lips began to quiver.

Mr. Bentley grew anxious. Why should his child be so agitated? Had this author really obtained some subtle power over that high nature? Was there a secret which he did not know?

"Look at me, Gillian."

"Well, father, I do."

"With your eyes—not with your soul."

"With all my soul!" she answered, smiling bravely. "I was a coward, but it was only for a minute." She did not think how difficult it would prove. "Oh, father! the heart should have a language for itself, to be used only once or twice in a lifetime."

"And if you had this language at command, what would it reveal, Gillian?"

Gillian sunk slowly to her knees, took her father's hand and pressed her lips to the palm. The hand shook; a cloud of anxiety darkened Bentley's face.

"Gillian—Gillian, what have you done? What does this mean?"

She lifted her face, radiant and glistening with tears; her eyes were like wet periwinkles; her mouth a rose-bud shaken by rain-drops.

"Father, as my mother loved you, I—I——"

He snatched his hand away, and shook her off as if she had been a viper. His face was ashen white, and he shrunk together chilly and hoarse.

"Love as your mother loved me! Girl—girl, what demon put those words into your mouth?"

She staggered back, clasping her hands.

"Father!"

He struggled with himself stoutly. You could see the veins swell on his forehead, and the great drops gather there.

"Speak on, Gillian, my child; I frightened you. Something you were ready to tell me."

"Father!" said Gillian, gently, and in a low voice; for she was still pale and frightened. "It is at Mrs. Ransom's request—indeed at her command—that I tell you this with my own lips, rather than wait for a stranger to startle, perhaps offend you with the knowledge that she says you should have had long ago. The gentleman is a friend of hers."

"What gentleman, my child?"

His accents were mournful, his lips white.

"Mr. Woodworth."

For a moment there was silence; then Mr. Bentley spoke.

"And you love this man?"

"He is a good man, father."

"And you love him?"

"Forgive me, father—but I do."

"Entirely, to the exclusion of every other love, of every other thought, with the whole might of your being? Is this the love you mean?"

She was on her knees before him. He took her clasped hands between his and lifted them upward, as if enforcing an oath.

"Father, I do love him even as you say—to the exclusion of every other love, of any other thought."

"Better than your father—your lonely, lonely father?"

"Differently; but not better."

"That is wrong, Gillian, very wrong. When a woman loves, it should be with all her soul; no affection must stand before that love. No man should be content without the whole being of his wife—or is content without it."

"Oh, father! I dare not tell you how much I do love him; my heart is breaking to speak, but cannot."

How beautiful she was! how proudly modest there on her knees speaking of her love!

"But will it last? I do not ask what the man is—that for another time—but will this love hold out to the end? Is it pure gold ingrained into the soul, or snow ready to melt under a new smile?"

"Oh, father! remember I am your daughter!"

"And hers!"

No words can describe the passionate bitterness of these two syllables: they fell like heated shot from his lips—a fierce wrath broke over his face. Gillian stood up cold and white.

"You speak of my mother!"

He did not answer her, but dropping his face on the two hands which he had clasped on the table, shook like a leaf.

All the pride went out from Gillian's heart. She drew close to her father, and bending down kissed his hot forehead again and again, murmuring—

"Father, forgive me—oh! forgive me, whatever my sin may be! It kills me to feel you tremble so: I never saw you weep before, father. What have I done?—what have I done?"

Bentley looked up and tried to smile, but with the heavy drops trembling on his face, the smile was like pale lightning after rain.

"Father!"

He looked at her, but did not speak.

"Father, does it pain you that I love this gentleman? He is noble—an honorable man; but I will die rather than see you unhappy."

Mr. Bentley drew her toward him, kissed her forehead, and said very tenderly, but with a sadness that went to her heart,

"Pain! No, Gillian, you never gave me pain in your life. I know something of this man: he is both honorable and of great ability. Why should I grieve that you love him? It is such qualities that should win a Bentley."

"Oh, my father!"

She could say no more. Grateful joy broke her voice. That moment she would have worshipped her father.

"Go, my child, go now. This is one of the moments that sweep over one like a hurricane. Half an hour ago you were my daughter—all mine. Now you belong to another—a stranger whom I have not seen half a dozen times in my life. You cannot pull up a wild flower by

the roots without disturbing the ground; do not think thus to dislodge a child from her father's heart and leave no anguish behind."

Gillian did not speak, but obeying the motion of his hand went out weeping bitterly.

Mr. Bentley walked the library, up and down, at first wildly, and by degrees with steadiness, till his usual calm demeanor came back. He was neither a weak nor selfish man, but this declaration had come upon him so suddenly that the shock was overpowering.

He had scarcely seated himself in the chair again when a servant announced Mr. Woodworth, and directly that gentleman entered the library. Actuated by an honorable wish to deal frankly with the father of Gillian, he had come at once to declare all that had passed between them, and henceforth retire from his suit, or urge it under the parental sanction.

No one, to have seen Mr. Bentley when he arose with grave courtesy to receive his visitor, would have believed in the storm of passion that had just swept over him. True, he was pale, and his eyes were heavy, but he had moved out of the clear light, and Woodworth saw nothing but a man of remarkable refinement, waiting to see his guest seated before he resumed his own position by the table.

Woodworth was a proud man—too proud for that undue estimate of Mr. Bentley's wealth which might have embarrassed an ordinary suitor. Possessed of great talent, and a high position won by that talent, it never entered his mind to feel that any inequality existed between him and the millionaire. On the contrary, had he found Mr. Bentley of the ordinary stamp of rich men, insolent or purse-proud, it is just possible that the pride of genius

might have recoiled from the connection. For genius can ill brook the presumption of wealth, and Woodworth knew his own powers well enough to be sure that they could win gold in the end, as they had already secured political position and literary fame.

But there was no reason for distrust here. Mr. Bentley was not a man to think of wealth when a separation from his child was the question. It was to him a matter of no consequence whatever that Woodworth lacked the means of adding to his own broad possessions. Being neither mercenary nor capable of suspecting others of so mean a feeling without just cause, he waived the question of property altogether, just as his high-souled daughter had done. He did not make it important enough to feel self-complacency that he was able to endow the man of genius with the wealth he neither despised nor coveted. In this respect the two men were alike. It was the fair girl who sat in a tremor of expectation up-stairs of whom both thought, and for whom both acted.

Gillian had heard the footsteps of her lover in the vestibule, and listened breathlessly till the library door closed upon him. She had no apprehension of the result of this visit to her father, but still her heart beat loudly, and her cheek flushed. They were talking of her: for the first time her noble father and lover were standing face to face in their new relations. How would they like each other? How would the sensitive and retiring nature of her father meet the frank energy of the young man?

The interview was not long. She heard the library door open and close—a footstep, not his, for her heart did not leap to the sound, but stood still, expectant, sounded on the marble floor. It was her father who mounted the grand staircase and approached her own room. The

same sad smile was on his lip—the same look of pain on his forehead. Gillian's heart began to ache as she saw him; for she was not one of those who could be happy while any thing she loved was in sorrow. The smile with which he addressed her was indescribably sweet.

"Gillian, go down: some one is waiting for you in the library."

She arose and went up to him with that exquisite grace which springs from deep feeling.

"Father," she pleaded, bowing her stately head like a white lily when it thirsts for night-dew—"father, bless me before I go."

He laid one hand on her head and blessed her with tears in his eyes.

Gillian felt her own eyes fill. Seldom, in her life, had she seen her father weep before that day. It was thus with a swell of holy tenderness at her heart that she went down to meet her betrothed.

Woodworth stood within the dim room, waiting. All his pride was gone: the tenderness of a great love reigned in its place. For the first time his soul gave away to the ardor of its new passion; his eyes flashed; his lip curved with joyous smiles. She lost all other thoughts as her eyes met his and became radiant as the morning.

They could not speak, for such love has no adequate language, but her hand was in his, a strong arm glided around her, and she felt the beating of his heart; his lips fell like a honey-bee to the bloom of hers: and then they sat down together on the silken cushions of the great window, happy as the angels when they have secured a soul for heaven.

As they sat thus in the sumptuous twilight the library door opened, and Michael Hurst stood in the gloom

closely regarding them. The pliant hinges in that house seldom made a noise, and it was some minutes before either Woodworth or Gillian saw the intruder. When they did look up, the cold surprise on Hurst's face made the young girl recoil. The serpent had entered their paradise.

"I beg pardon; but the servant informed me that I should find Miss Hart in the library," said Hurst, advancing to the window, and searching the two with his eyes.

Gillian only bowed, while Woodworth remained silent, annoyed by the intrusion, but unconscious that it had any importance.

"Shall I find her in the drawing-room?" persisted the insolent young man, still fixing his eyes on Gillian; "or may I expect her here?"

"I do not know where my aunt is," said Gillian, with a proud lift of the head; "but she seldom visits this room: it is my father's."

"The servant will be able to tell me, perhaps," said Hurst, bowing profoundly, and moving toward the door; "do not let me disturb you."

There was a sneer in his voice which Gillian felt keenly. Why was she compelled to see that man beneath her father's roof? What infatuation was it which gave him so much power over Aunt Hetty? That sad, nervous woman, usually so still and yielding, had proved obstinate in receiving him at all hours, seasonable and unseasonable. Martha Hart, too, had brought the force of her innocent will into the contest—for there had been one—and could not understand what Gillian could find against a young man so handsome, and who always had some charming thing to say, which was enough to make any woman like him. As for old Dinah, she was infatuated with the young man.

He had given her a real Madras handkerchief, which she wore triumphantly as a turban, and always designated her as Miss Hart's maid, a distinction she was resolute in maintaining with a high hand if that proved necessary.

Hurst found the elder and younger Miss Hart in a cosy little sitting-room up-stairs, where he had known them to be all along; but the servant had told him that Miss Bentley was in the library with a gentleman, and he had gratified an audacious curiosity as we have related.

Martha—really it is quite impossible to tell the changes that had come over pretty Martha Hart since her retreat from the country. She was so pretty in her white muslin dress and cherry-colored ribbons, her round arms had grown so white, and her plump hands so daintily soft and dimpled, that she seemed more like a good-natured, happy child than a full-grown girl, as she really was. Fresh from her farm-life, she enjoyed the luxury of her new existence like a bird when he finds the cherry trees laden with fruit, and received all the flattery bestowed on her with an appetite as keen as the little songster's.

Aunt Hetty and Dinah had been called to a consultation with regard to the costume in which Martha was to appear at the great party now close at hand. A curious council it was. Aunt Hetty, of course, had no opinion to give: she never had, poor thing! Martha herself was very much in favor of appearing as a flower girl, with a basket of roses on her head; while Dinah impetuously expressed her preference for an oriental costume, glittering with gold-lace, and gorgeous with contrasting colors.

"Now, young Misses, what's the use of dem daisies and cowslops down here in York?—got nuff and plenty ob dem tings on de farm; jes yer put on dese garmins as some Queen ob Sheba hab worn afore yer, and stand up

wid de best on 'em. What if Miss Gillian is a head taller than you is, an' walks proud as de peacock afore him fedders drop, hain't yer got de same blood in yer veins, wid eyes like black huckleberries, and a skin like curd now you've got de tan off? Jes yer let 'em see as der is more en one queen under dis horspertal roof. Miss Gillian is a smart gal, but she ain't all cr'ation no more den udder folks. Golly no!"

"Hush!" said Aunt Hetty, nervously, "some one is coming!" and the old lady held her breath as the footsteps approached.

"Oh, golly, I'se satisfied. It's only Mister Hurst, and he's sartin ter gree to my 'pinion. We has de same taste: jes look at dis handkercher and see."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SUNSHINE AND SHADOWS OF LOVE.

"WHO is speaking of Mr. Hurst?" exclaimed the young man, entering the room; "not the lovely Martha? I fear with so many admirers she can hardly find a word to throw away on a poor fellow like me."

"Because you throw away so many on yourself," said Martha, laughing as she arranged the artificial flowers in a little basket on her lap. "Wait till I put these red roses in against the white, so. There, ain't I a pretty flower-girl? and isn't this just the character for me?"

"It is perfection," cried the young man, as she coquet-

tishly balanced the basket on her head, "one almost smells the new-mown hay from which the flowers were gathered."

Martha laughed till the basket trembled on her head.

"That's all you know of real flowers," she cried. "Why these are made of muslin, and moss, and ever so many things. Real flowers would wilt under the first chandelier that shone on them. No, no, real roses for the country, and artificial ones here. Don't laugh, I'm a great deal wiser than you think."

"Wiser? why there never was such a little philosopher. I am really half in love with your wisdom, and quite with yourself. What say you, Miss Hart, shall I propose at once to this pretty flower-girl?"

"Propose! propose! what! you?" faltered the old lady, terrified as she always was by any thing that led her thoughts into a new channel. "I never thought of the thing. Our Martha and you! Is this in earnest? You should not say these dreadful things in joke, Michael. Mr. Hurst, it shocks one so."

"Well, then, suppose we change the lady, and say Miss Bentley instead of Miss Hart?" persisted the young man, with a glance in his eyes that sent the blood from Aunt Hetty's face. "That would be one way of making restitution, don't you think so, madam?"

The blood that had retreated from Aunt Hetty's face now left her lips also, and, with a faint moan, she fell back in her chair, quite insensible.

Hurst regarded her with a triumphant look, while Martha flung the basket to the floor, crushing the flowers as she knelt before her aunt, and Dinah ran up to her chest for a camphor-bottle, with which she soon appeared,

pouring its contents into the palm of her hand as she hurried along.

"There, them's um. Dat camphor'll bring her too if any thing on yearth will! 'Tain't none of yer York trash, but the ginuine article 'solved in rum as id make yer mouth water, temp'rance or no temp'rance! Dar now, don't yer see her eyelids are beginning ter flutter? Mighty powerful stuff dis 'ere camphor! Most raise de dead if 'em hadn't laid too long. Dar now, how is yer, Miss Hetty? Lor, when a person is prepared aforehand wid means ob resurrection, dese fits 'mount to nothin' nohow."

"Are you better, dear lady?" said Hurst, bending over the helpless woman, as she shrunk together in her easy-chair.

She looked at him wistfully, almost in terror.

"What—what did you mean? Restitution! who talks of that?"

"No one talked of any thing that should give you pain. It was a joke—what else should it be? Are you better? Why, how you tremble!"

"She always trembles when these fits come on," said Martha, chafing the cold hands in hers. "The other day, when Cousin Gillian spoke about you, she didn't get over shivering all night."

"Spoke about me? What did the young lady say, pretty Martha?"

Dinah set her broad foot down on Martha's little slipper with a force that made the unconscious girl cry out. When she looked up to expostulate, the old woman's face was gathered into a thousand warning wrinkles till it looked like a dried prune.

"What did she say? I was present on dat 'casion,

Mas Hurst, and a more beautifuler complaisance never fell from lubly lips den she 'spressed 'garding yer. Ob course der wasn't no 'casion for Miss Hetty here ter go an' faint like a consarned ole fool, and she didn't do it nohow."

Hurst said nothing, but he reasoned with himself.

"So I have been under discussion, and unpleasantly! Well, the sooner we open the war now the better. If I do not mistake the signs, it is full time for action."

"There, now that Aunt Hetty is better," said Martha, rising from her knee, scarlet from Dinah's rebuke, "will you help me pick up my poor flowers? I have made up my mind, Dinah. The Queen of Sheba may go to Amsterdam; I'll be a flower girl and nothing else. With a basket on my head, wreaths over my shoulder, and a muslin apron running over with roses, red roses. Let them wilt—who cares? they are sweeter, a thousand times, when the bloom is gone, than these pretty shams."

Dinah tossed her head and sniffed the air grandly.

"Der am pussons as kin 'commodate demselves ter any sitewation; and dem as can't do it nohow. I don't want to make collusions, but every one understands her own compassity best. Now if yer was to say, 'Dinah, am you compacitated to be a Queen of Sheba, or any udder 'public?' I should say to once, 'Yes, I is—don't look furder—Dinah's here.' But der am a difference 'tween folks and folks, no doubt 'bout dat. Dere was our Sarah, Miss Gillian's mudder, she was a born queen, dyed in de wool: couldn't a-made her carry a basket ob roses nohow. Wid one toss ob her head she'd a-sent 'em flyin'; but den she was white folks."

"You remember Mrs. Bentley, then?" inquired Hurst, with sudden interest.

"Well, I 'spect likely. Why not?" answered the old woman, with a shrewd gleam in her eyes.

"Did you live at Mr. Hart's at the time of her marriage?"

"'Spect likely," replied Dinah, suddenly becoming shy and laconic.

"And before—when the first Mr. Bentley was killed?"

"Ask agin. I 'spect it was afore dat, I fust went to live at de stun house, 'cause my nancestors was born slaves in dat 'dentical family, and none of their 'scendants would be born anywhere else on no 'count. Liz am de last sprout on de ancestrous tree, and her cradle stands in a garret, circumstantious ebidence ob her bein' born in de hum ob dem honorous colored pusons as descended afore her."

"Then you have always lived with the Harts?"

"Them's um," answered Dinah, with a nod of the head. "Come wid em from down-east."

"And you know the entire history of the family?"

"Mr. Hurst—Mr. Hurst—how can you?" cried Martha, pointing to Aunt Hetty, who had risen, and stood gazing on the young man, white as snow, with her pale lips parted, as if she wished to speak but could not.

Hurst turned suddenly and stood mute, while Aunt Hetty moved toward him like a ghost, and, touching his arm with her finger, said hoarsely,

"Young man, desist. In the name of the dead, desist!"

He stooped his head and whispered,

"I will, dear lady, when you tell me the whole truth."

She looked wildly around the room, as if searching for some means of escape; then her eyes turned to his with a fascinated stare, and she said, in the same hoarse voice,

"Come with me then."

He followed her out of the room toward her own chamber, and they disappeared through the door.

"Now dat consarned ole fool has gone full jump down de young sarpent's throat, jus' as I've seen a robin fly inter de mout' ob a black snake, singin' all de time. Dinah! Dinah! if it wasn't for your 'scretion what would dey all come to?—corn shucks and rye straw, nothing more 'stantial. Marcy Lord! hasn't I a time on it?"

Away Dinah went, leaving Martha bewildered among her flowers; but she was just in time to see Miss Hart's door shut and the key turned in her face.

"Well," said she, with enforced philosophy, "when de debil gets de start ob Dinah, look out for cinders! If dat darned ole maid wants to turn up Jack, she'll do it now. Dat young feller has a good idea about de handkerchers as is becoming to de fair sex, but de ole sarpent is in him, or I don't know de horns ob de debil when de poke out 'daciously. Now, ole nigger, be on yer guard, for der am troubles brewin', no mistake 'bout dat."

The old woman went to her own room, for she was handsomely accommodated in the upper story, where her chest formed a conspicuous ornament to the room; but she was really too anxious for rest anywhere, and hovered for an hour about the door of Hetty Hart's chamber, really alarmed, and wondering what could be the subject of this long conference.

At last the door opened, and young Hurst came out. His face was flushed, and his eyes were dusky with passion—burning, fierce passion—that made you recoil, like the poisonous gases in a well. He swept by the old negress without appearing to see her, but still possessed presence of mind enough to step softly and leave the house without observation.

Dinah went into Aunt Hetty's room, and found the poor lady prostrate on a couch, trembling so violently that every thing around her shook. She must have wept passionately—an unusual thing with her, for a cushion that had been thrust under her head was wet, and the tears were still streaming down her face, which was white and contracted, as if an attack of cholera had left her prostrate.

"Miss Hetty, what hab you been and done? I 'plore ye tell yer ole servant all 'bout it! If trouble of all kind falls on de Hart family, who kin bear it better den de old nigger woman as watched ye from yer cradle, and knows more 'en she'll eber talk 'bout?"

Hetty lifted one hand, with which she swept the tears from her eyes. The look which she cast on Dinah was heart-rending.

"What did you tell him? Tell de old woman or yer heart 'ill bust for sart'in, and de Lord on'y kin help yer if she can't! Speak out! what did ye say ter him?"

"I don't know, Dinah."

"And he stayed here a hull hour?"

"He was pleading—threatening—wounding me to death all the time. Oh, Dinah, my good Dinah, pity me, pity me; for I have no friend on earth—nothing but you; for you lived with us then, and for that, if nothing else, I love you, Dinah."

"Poor chile! poor chile! Jes as she was when I held her in dese arms a baby. She hain't been so nat'ral since that day. Look up, chile; Dinah 'ill take care of yer. Now jis try and 'member 'bout what ye told dat feller, for 'fore de Lord I 'spects him."

"Don't! oh! don't, Dinah! my heart is so sore from his cruelty! He would not believe me! He frightened

the words out of my bosom, and then raved that they did not please him! What shall I do, Dinah? tell me what I *can* do?"

"What can you do! Why, jes dis: Till dat young rapscallion begs pardon—for dat 'ere is de word as come uppermost to my mout'—tell him to keep 'bout his business, and not come near yer ag'in. You've acted like a bird twitterin' to get out ob de way ob a snake ever since he came here so much. Miss Gillian loves him like p'ison, and my own young Misses will soon be getting skeery when he comes in. If it wasn't for you, Miss Hetty, 'fore de Lord I don't believe he'd come at all!"

"I know, I know!" moaned Hetty, writhing on the bed. "I wish they wouldn't feel so toward him; it only makes bitterness and works danger. Tell Martha not to turn against him, for my sake—for Gillian's sake."

"Look a-here!" exclaimed Dinah, sniffing the air after her old fashion when an unpleasant idea presented itself, "if yer means ter 'siniwate dat dis feller is wantin' to spark Miss Mattie, an' I'se to look on widout 'spressin' my 'pinion on de suggect, 'tain't of no use. He's a mean specimin, and I'll tell her so."

"Oh! it isn't that. He doesn't want Martha. It isn't for her sake he comes here. I wish it was."

"P'raps yer does; but I dusent. If yer wants to let a fox enter a brood ob young chickens, or hatch a rattlesnake in a hen's nest, try it, but Dinah won't help. He give me a handke'cher, and I'se grateful; but de young Misses is under my 'tection, and he shan't look at her over a pair of six rail-bars, if I can 'fend her from it."

Hetty was not listening; her eyes were fixed on the wall, and her hands clasped hard, as if she were trying to pray and could not.

Dinah began to speak again; but the poor woman motioned her off with a despairing movement, and closed her eyes wearily, as if they ached.

"So yer bound not ter tell what's on yer heart?" said the old negress, wiping her eyes. "Well, de Lord be wid yer; per'aps yer'll tell Him what 'tis dat 'stresses yer so. Nobody else can't do nothin' 'cause dere's no comprehensionizing de fust princ'pals ob de suggect."

So Dinah went forth, angry that all her eloquence had obtained no knowledge of a subject that had interested her so deeply, and grieved to the depths of her really kind heart to see her mistress so unhappy.

Dinah had scarcely left the chamber when Aunt Hetty, pale as death, and with a strange look on her face, as if tears had washed all the light and color away, arose and tottered around her chamber, with one hand lifted to her forehead. She was searching for a bonnet and shawl, which she put on with dreary slowness. Then she sat down on a bed, and fell to thinking, hour after hour, till the light faded, leaving her almost in darkness. At last she looked suddenly toward the window, gathered the shawl around her, and stole out by a back staircase seldom used by any one except the servants.

Gillian had parted from her lover and gone to her own room—that sanctuary of a maiden's thoughts which should be, like the owner, pure as snow. This feeling had possessed Mr. Bentley when he took so much pains to combine simplicity with luxury in the arrangements of the suit of rooms appropriated exclusively to his daughter. Bright and fragrant was Gillian's chamber as she entered it; more fragrant than usual, for a basket of moss roses and heliotrope had reached her in the morning, so arranged that she had no doubt of the giver; and clusters of these lovely flowers

were scattered about the room: you could see them through the delicate curtains of the bed, resting upon the pure linen pillows, and sending a pink glow up to the soft masses of embroidery which clung to the lace like snow-flakes. They were grouped in the tall vermilion glasses that stood upon the sculptured whiteness of the mantle-piece, just in quantities to send a faint fragrance through the room and no more.

The window draperies were of lace, like those of the bed, and floated over blinds of a blue so delicate that they seemed patches of a warm sky breaking the edge of a summer cloud. A faint tinge of blue damask, with which the couch and easy-chairs were cushioned, stole out from the fine linen covers; and clusters of white roses, tied by blue ribbons, formed a beautiful pattern to the blue and drab ground of the carpet.

Two doors opened from this chamber, opposite the entrance: one led to her dressing-room, which, with all its luxurious paraphernalia, was closed; and the other to her bath-room, which was cool and pure as a white marble floor and slabs advancing a yard up the polished walls could render it.

A marble bath, in the form of a huge conch shell, occupied one end of the room, the lip of the shell curving downward, and an inner lining of pale amber, flushing off to pink as it retreated to the heart of the shell, melted softly into its edges.

Above the bath, and forming a sort of cornice to the marble behind, was a lovely statuette, one of those generous purchases with which Mr. Bentley loved to encourage struggling genius. It was a female, softly falling to sleep, with her head resting on one arm, and her figure reclining on a bank. At her feet, the lotus, with its broad

leaves, suggested the neighborhood of water, which was artfully carried out by the liquid drops that gushed through them and fell raining into the bath.

The bell-like tinkle of these water drops was in harmony with Gillian's thoughts. She lay down on a couch which commanded a view of the statuette, gazing dreamily on the sweet face, where a perpetual smile was frozen, which, after all, was but a shadow of her own warm, living joy.

There the young girl lay, with her head uplifted by the pillows of the couch, her hands softly folded over her heart, and her lips parted as sweet, unuttered words died away upon them in smiles.

You could have counted the beatings of her heart through the muslin folds of her dress; the rise and fall of the white hands clasped over it, and crushing out perfume from the spray of moss rose-buds which trembled to each thrill of happiness that stirred her bosom.

Then she turned her head upon the pillow, giving her glowing cheeks to the air. She gathered the roses from her bosom and pressed them to her lips with both hands, murmuring softly, as the water drops fell, "He loves me! He loves me!"

Deep feeling is poverty-stricken when it seeks for adequate expression. It was the gush and warmth of this tender whisper which would have told you how happy the young girl was.

Love is childlike in its simplicity—inexplicable to those who have never felt the joy of knowing it, and of that number are, perhaps, ninety-five people out of a hundred. Gillian was one of the happy few. Heart, mind, and taste went with her affections. The pure romance of her nature was satisfied entirely with the man

who had won her. Pride, high, womanly pride, which was her fault and her glory, crested itself on the choice she had made. She could look up to him for strength, and yet feel that she was his mate—that he had a right to be proud of her, as she was of him.

Then she thought of her father with a feeling that she had never loved him so thoroughly as then. In the breaking up of her heart a thousand precious feelings were found which she had not dreamed of before. In the glow of a great happiness, all her old affections took new vigor. To love and be loved is to man or woman the crowning joy of existence, and such it was to Gillian.

Gillian felt this beautiful truth to the depths of her being, and it made a child of her. She kissed the roses he had given till their perfume glowed on her mouth. She kissed her own white hands because his lips had touched them last. She got up and surveyed herself in the tall mirror of her dressing-room, jealous that she was not beautiful enough, and greedy of more loveliness for his sake.

She let down her heavy, auburn hair, that it might ripple through her hands and over her arm while she exulted in its lustre. The glow and bloom of her beauty became precious to her for the first time, and all for his sake.

All at once she became more simple in her tastes: diamond and emerald rings were taken from her fingers and thrown into the pretty caskets. Such gauds should not come in contact with the little circlet of gold which Woodworth had, that morning, placed upon her hand. Henceforth his taste should adorn her. She would value no ornament which he did not choose. He should be all the world to her—more than the world; for Gillian could have no idea of a happy eternity which he did not share.

When Gillian made this little sacrifice—for she longed to give up something for her lover—she went back to the couch again. Her hands stole up and clasped themselves over her heart—which beat more softly now—and, closing her eyes, she fell into a sweet dream.

All this time Aunt Hetty lay in the agony of some great sorrow, moaning on her bed in the chamber above—perfect happiness and deep suffering within twenty feet of each other, without jarring or sympathy.

When Gillian fell to dreaming on her couch, Aunt Hetty stole out from her chamber, and crept like a ghost by the door which shut in so much joy. She did not feel it, but went on her own icy way, doubting if the world held any thing but pain and sorrow.

Dinah sat in the upper hall, folding for herself a turban of colored gauze, which was intended for the great party. She saw the quiet lady stealing down the back staircase, and, hurriedly laying down her finery, snatched up a shawl and followed, muttering to herself, "I wonder what secret she kin have dat ole Dinah hain't got a right ter know."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE OLD CHEST OF DRAWERS.

"MARY NICHOLSON!"

Mrs. Nicholson came out of her little bedroom, looking very much frightened.

"Did you speak to me, Mrs. Frost?"

The old lady did not answer promptly, for she was busy counting some change in the palm of her hand with great eagerness, as the increased vibrations of her head testified.

"Ten, eleven, twelve—one shilling—three cents. Why, Mary Nicholson! Mary Nicholson! what does this mean! You've tampered with the change. I've suspected it for some time, now it's clear. Mary Nicholson, what have you done with three cents that ought to be here and isn't?"

"Three cents!" faltered Mrs. Nicholson. "It's there, I—I'm sure. It's all right, ma'am."

Again the old woman counted the money in her hand, nodding, nodding, nodding over it with terrible eagerness.

"No, Mary Nicholson, it isn't right. I sent you to market, believing that you could be trusted with untold gold. I gave you twenty-five cents to buy marketing with: according to orders you bring half a pound of liver, with a trifle thrown in for the cat, which I'm sure the man ought to give, considering he has all our custom; now the liver cost just five cents; there was a cent's worth of parsley, and—and——"

"Horseradish, ma'am; you forgot the horseradish!"

"Horseradish, one cent."

"Two!" said Mrs. Nicholson, desperately, "two!"

"No, one. I say one cent for horseradish; one for parsley; five for liver—seven in all. Now, Mary Nicholson, don't be afraid; I don't mean to go to the extremity of the law with you; I'm willing to consider your youth and inexperience, but where are those three cents?"

Mrs. Nicholson was about to speak, and, we grieve to say, about to insist on the horseradish, but Mrs. Frost

went off like a pendulum, and began nodding so vehemently that the culprit broke down, and penitently confessed that she had spent three cents for a little bunch of garden flowers to put in Mr. Hurst's room: she thought perhaps they might entice him to come home earlier.

Mrs. Frost reached forth her hand and took her staff from the corner. It was impossible to support the weight of her indignation without help.

"And you have done this—you spend my money to entice young men into noticing you! Mary Nicholson! Mary Nicholson! flighty as you are, I wouldn't have believed this of you. It goes beyond any thing. But this isn't the first time: it's three weeks since I saw you take that wineglass with the gold-sprig on it out of the cupboard. I suppose you've been robbing me and buying flowers ever since."

"No, ma'am, no. I changed the water twice a-day and cut off the stems to freshen 'em: one little bunch lasted two days, sometimes three."

"Three times seven are twenty-one—say once in three days: I don't want to be too severe on you, Mary Nicholson; but I say once in three days; the third of three weeks is seven, and three times seven are twenty-one. Look, Mary Nicholson, if your flighty young mind can be brought to reflect—see of how much you have robbed me in three weeks; twenty-one cents. Why, that ought to buy our marketing three days. What can I do about it? if you had any wages I'd stop it out of them."

"But I haven't, or you might and welcome," said Mrs. Nicholson, despondingly.

"No, there's the trouble. What am I to demand, then? You haven't got but that one dress that I know of."

"No, I haven't had a change this ten months. Don't

you remember scolding about the noise I made washing it out after you went to bed?"

"Remember! I should think so: always at some flighty thing or another. But there's your shawl—but I haven't seen it this ever so long—that is, perhaps, worth the money you have stolen."

"Stolen! I didn't think of stealing. It's a hard word to give to a women of my age, and I won't bear it from you or anybody else."

"Hoity, toity! so the young blood's up when one mentions a bit of finery; rather go to prison than part with that, I suppose. Very well."

"I—I haven't got the shawl, or you might take it and welcome," said the poor old lady, trembling at the name of a prison.

"Haven't got the shawl?" cried Mrs. Frost, and her head took a new leave of motion. "Not got your shawl?"

"No, it was getting warm weather, so I put it in pawn."

"Put it in pawn! What, a respectable member of my family running about and pawning things! But what did you do with the money?"

"You can have the ticket if you like," cried the poor creature, making a desperate effort to evade the question, "it's good security."

"But what did you do with the money? I want to know that, Mary Nicholson!"

"I—I bought a—a strip of carpeting."

"Carpeting for what?"

"To put down before Mr. Hurst's bed. He's so delicate, you know, and I was sure the floor would be cold for his bare feet when he got up in the morning."

Mrs. Frost sat down, bowed both hands on the top of her cane, and laughed till you could see the single tooth in her under-jaw, like a stump in a ploughed field.

"Mary Nicholson, I believe you're nothing worse than a fool all the time. Now just bring that strip of carpeting down and put it before my bed, and I'll overlook this."

"Yes, ma'am," said Mary Nicholson, meekly, "I'll go at once."

She came down directly with a strip of bright new carpeting in her hand, submissive, but with tears in her eyes.

Mrs. Frost carried the fragment into her own bed-room, and spread it upon the faded carpet there, chuckling over her triumph. Then she came back to the sitting-room, planted the staff before her, and gave the poor culprit, who sat crying in a corner, the sediments of her wrath.

"Now, Mary Nicholson, I've got one thing to tell you. If I catch you setting your cap for Michael again in this scandalous way, trying to delude him with flower traps and carpet traps, I won't answer for what I will do. I'd send you adrift this minute, but that I'm sure you'd get into mischief without me to take care of you. But, remember, if I forgive this, it's out of pure kindness."

"I know it is, and I'm grateful—only somehow my wicked heart won't feel kindness as it ought to. But one thing is certain, Mrs. Frost, if I did get these things for Mr. Hurst, it wasn't with any idea but of making him a little comfortable—I'm an old woman, you know, upward of seventy."

Here Mrs. Frost broke into a fit of sudden indignation, which set her head off in an effort at perpetual motion again with a vengeance.

"An old woman, and only seventy! What do you mean

by that, you affected thing? I'm above ninety and not old yet, and shan't be these fifteen years to come. Do you mean to insult me by calling yourself *old?*"

"No, I didn't think of you—only of myself. It seems to me as if I wasn't so young as I was, especially on washing-days, and when there is a good deal of going up and down stairs to do. But maybe it's only a fancy. I won't mention the thing again if you don't like it."

"Well, I don't, so there's an end on't. Now go down and cook the liver, and don't forget the cat; you've neglected her since Michael came home. There he is now, going up-stairs: run and see what he wants."

Mrs. Nicholson went up-stairs with a sinking heart. She dreaded that Hurst would miss the carpet and question her about it; almost hoped that he might see her flowers and forget the rest.

But Hurst passed by the glass full of humble blossoms without a glance, and tramped over the naked floor with equal indifference. His face was white with internal rage, his eyes smouldering over some evil purpose. They flashed eagerly when Mrs. Nicholson came in. He turned from an old "chest of drawers," before which he was standing, and demanded of her, in a hoarse whisper, if she had any knowledge where the keys of that old rattle-trap were kept.

Yes, Mrs. Nicholson knew where the keys were kept, for they had grown rusty since she came to the house in an old-fashioned jar which stood on the sitting-room mantle-piece, but for the world she would not touch them. Besides, there was nothing in the "chest of drawers" but the minister's old papers—she had heard Mrs. Frost say so a thousand times.

"Oh, is that all?" said Hurst, turning away; "not

worth thinking about. I thought all the old papers were kept in the open garret. What is the use of lumbering up this room with them?"

"Oh, don't speak a word about it to Mrs. Frost, I beg of you; she's like a child when any one mentions the minister. I don't suppose she ever really loved any thing else in her life. It is quite heart-breaking to hear her talk of him sometimes. If he'd lived, maybe her old age would have been pleasanter to herself and everybody else."

"Heaven knows it's crabbed enough now!" said Hurst, rudely. "I wonder she has not starved you into the grave long ago; but you are a fool to let her: she's got hoards of money somewhere, I'm sure of it."

"No, no. I don't believe it, for she told me once that if it hadn't been for a sum of money placed out at interest by some one who had been under great obligations to her husband, she would have been left with nothing but the house to support herself with. I don't think she really can afford to live better than we do."

Here a quivering scream from the stairs made the gossiping old woman start for the door.

"Mary Nicholson! I say, Mary Nicholson, what keeps you talking so long? Don't you know it's almost dinner time?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm coming right off," and away she hurried, while Mrs. Frost again called out,

"Michael! was it you that came in, Michael?"

"Yes, grandmother," said the young man, appearing at the top of the stairs. "I thought you did not look quite well this morning, and so came in to inquire about you. Mrs. Nicholson says you are better, so I will come down and have a little chat with you before dinner"

The old woman smiled grimly and turned into her little parlor, looking back to see if Hurst was following.

He came down directly, with a smile on his mouth, but the same smouldering look about the eyes. The old lady was in her easy-chair near the fire-place; and he stood by her, leaning one elbow on the mantle-piece, on which stood the old china jar mentioned by Mrs. Nicholson. A slight noise disturbed the old lady.

"Take care, you will knock off my china jar with your arm," she said. "I heard the buttons on your sleeves jingle against it. Do come away. That jar was *his* first present. I can't bear any one to touch it.

"It's nothing," he answered, promptly, dropping one hand softly to his pocket, as he sauntered round her chair to the other side of the hearth. "I only like to get near you, grandmother, especially when anxious about your health."

"My health! why I'm well enough," cried the old woman, testily. "What on earth has set you thinking about my health, Michael?"

"Oh, you are getting ill-tempered with me now, and all because love makes me over anxious. I will go away."

"No, no, Michael."

"Yes, if my over-anxiety offends you, it is better that I should go."

"But you will be home this evening?"

"Of course, but not to intrude on you. Unless you come to my room I shall not think myself wanted."

"Why, Michael, you know well enough I cannot go up and down stairs like a girl. It's five years since I've been up those stairs."

"Indeed, I did not know that. Well, I will come back early and read to you a while."

When the old woman turned her head to express the pleasure she felt, Hurst was gone.

The young man kept his word. Early in the evening he came in and read to the old woman till she grew sleepy and went to her room. It was yet very early in the evening, and Mrs. Nicholson seemed disposed to have a little social chat, but a peremptory voice from within ordered her to bed, and she went off reluctantly; while Hurst went to the outer door and placed it ajar, in case he should wish to go out again in the night, no unusual thing with him.

Then he mounted the stairs and went to his own chamber, secure of being uninterrupted.

With a light in his hand, he tried the keys which he took from his pocket in the locks of the old chest of drawers, and with difficulty shot the rusty bolts. A mass of papers met his search, nicely arranged and most of them labelled. These he turned over eagerly till he came to a parcel of letters folded up more carefully than the others, which he sat down to read.

It was impossible to guess what those letters contained by the man's face, which was clouded when he sat down, fierce when he got up. He twisted the black ribbon which had bound the package around it again, and thrust the letters in his bosom. Then he hurriedly tossed over the contents of one of the drawers, as if searching for something which he had cast aside; and after a little, he found a parcel of printed blanks yellow from age, which he secured together with a package of letters which the good clergyman had written to his wife.

With these he sat down at a table, studied the letters and blanks closely, and began to write.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE UNWILLING ACCOMPLICE.

Woodworth was now Gillian's accepted lover. After a generous struggle with himself, Mr. Bentley had given a cordial consent to this engagement, and to the tumult of doubt came the heaven of a confirmed and perfect love. No bird ever seemed more quiet brooding in its nest, than Gillian appeared as she moved about that spacious house, or sat in her luxurious boudoir, wondering how any one could think this world a place of trouble. To her it was bright as paradise. If the sight of Michael Hurst gliding toward her aunt's room with a soft step and a strange look in the face disturbed her repose for a single moment, it was followed by a proud curve of the lip, and a feeling of disdain that any thing so insignificant could intrude on her great happiness. How dared this man lift his eyes to the woman whom Woodworth had exalted by his love?

These thoughts were arrogant, perhaps, but Gillian was not only proud in her own spirit but imperial in her pride where her love was concerned. There is no equal on earth to the man a woman loves with her whole heart, and thus Gillian, our bright, beautiful Gillian, loved the man to whom her faith was pledged. It was the homage of pure appreciation to genius—the romance and passion of youth crowned this devotion with a glory.

Thus Gillian felt as if some ill-omened bird was flitting through her paradise, when Hurst passed her with his half-sarcastic face and mocking indifference. But what had she to fear from him? Her position was assured. Young, beautiful, and beloved, what had she to dread from Michael Hurst's presence in her aunt's room? Surely nothing! Yet Gillian's heart would recoil at the sound of his footstep, and a thrill of disgust would pass through her frame if his voice reached her. This made her angry; a creature so insignificant had no right to disturb her thus.

On the night of her party, Gillian's engagement to Woodworth was to be admitted, if not proclaimed; and directly after that it was settled that her marriage should take place.

There was to be no change in the household. Bentley would not give up his daughter, but welcomed a son into his own dwelling—a son that might, in some degree, enliven the solitude which surrounded him; for though in the world, Bentley lived a man apart, and was in reality as little acquainted with the gossip, scandal, and trifles of social life as a hermit. The dignity of character which kept him aloof from these things imposed solitude upon him, for, after all, the interests of social life are made up of trifles which sensitive men like him reject.

Bentley had seen young Hurst more than once, but he was not aware how frequently he visited the house, or that he had presumed to lift his eyes to Gillian. Looking upon him as an acquaintance of Miss Hart's, he scarcely gave his presence or absence from the house a moment's thought. Something about the young gentleman he did not like, but the feeling was so vague that he was hardly conscious of it.

After Hurst's presumption in Mrs. Ransom's grounds that day, Gillian had made a faint effort to persuade her aunt to exclude him from the house; but Aunt Hetty, usually so shrinking and mild, fired up on the instant, offered to leave the house herself, but absolutely refused to be restricted in her own movements, or the company she might receive.

Gillian was far too proud for explanations which compromised her delicacy, and forbore to press the matter; so Hurst came as usual, but the air which he had assumed then grew haughtier every day, and there was a look of subtle triumph in his eyes which became annoying as it was inexplicable.

On the morning before the great party, Hurst was in Aunt Hetty's room. The door was closed, and the two sat far apart, looking away from each other like persons who had been talking on a subject which was annoying to one and painful to the other.

Aunt Hetty had not been crying, but there was a white stillness in her face which gave it a deathly look, and through her frame came short, nervous spasms, which, at Hurst's angry command, she was striving in vain to suppress.

"You are sure that he has consented?"

Aunt Hetty bowed, and from her white lips came a faint, "Yes."

"And that the engagement will be known to every one to-morrow night?"

"She told me so herself."

"And the marriage? How soon is that to come off?"

Hurst spoke bitterly and with a sneer.

"I don't know," said the old lady; "very soon, I think.

Martha can tell: I heard her talking yesterday about being bridesmaid."

"No matter what their plans are," said Hurst, fiercely, "I will thwart them long before they are settled."

The old lady started up and clasped her little hands, that shook and trembled like dead leaves before him.

"Oh, Michael, Michael, give that up—in the name of God give it up. I cannot stand by you—the bare thought is killing me. It is fraud, infamy, wicked, wicked infamy; the judgment of heaven would fall on us both."

Hurst arose and bent his fierce white face over the trembling creature.

"Woman, would you have me curse you?"

"You! you! No, father of mercies, no—that would be more terrible yet."

"Hate you?" persisted the fiend, growing hoarse with rage.

"Hate me! you! you! Oh, my God, my God, hear what he says!"

"Abandon you forever?"

The poor woman writhed in her chair, moaning with impotent pain.

"For her sake—oh, Sarah, my sister, that it should have come to this! Can you hear?—do you know——"

Now two great tears came swelling up to her wild eyes, and dropped heavily, as if turned to lead by the pain that sent them forth.

"Once for all," said the young man, grasping both her hands, and crushing them together till the pain flickered up to her face. "Once for all, let us understand each other. I will go on steadily, resolutely, unrelenting, and you shall help me."

"I cannot! I cannot!" she cried.

He took no notice of that plaintive wail, but went on.

"Be firm, and I cannot fail—be firm, and I am more than a thousand nephews, more than a thousand sons to you. No angel was ever loved as I will love you. No queen was ever obeyed as I will obey you."

A look of troubled affection came into that pale face—a wretched, yearning fondness, that would have touched a wild animal.

He saw it, and, dropping to one knee, threw his arms around her neck, and laid his cheek against her shoulder.

"I will be obedient like a little boy—kind, oh, so kind!—there, there, don't sob, but listen. Remember this is my right—ask yourself if it is not—I but claim what is before God my own. He has had it now almost a quarter of a century—has lived in luxury—pampered that proud girl till she thinks herself a goddess. Besides, I do not mean to dispossess him, nor to force the question into court. Be firm as I will, and all is arranged without trouble. Promise me—promise me!"

He looked at her amid his pleading with a tenderness so real that her tears fell like dew.

"I think if you asked me to kill myself I should do it," she said, timidly returning his caress.

"But I do not ask that—heaven forbid. I only wish you to remember the years in which I have planned, and worked, and suffered, to earn a decent living, while these persons have been feasting and pampering themselves on the property to which I have a right. Who, except yourself and the Bloomingdale woman over yonder, has ever thought or cared for me?"

"But old Mrs. Frost was good to you. I am sure she ought to have been, for Sarah did every thing for her."

"Oh, yes! I do not complain. But what was an old

woman like that to a child that pined as I did for a father to guide, and a mother to love me? I have suffered enough—more than enough—for any thing they cared I might have been in State's prison now. But their time is coming. Let them stand cringing on the steps of this great house as I have done; let them meet cold looks as I did not an hour ago, and feel the Bentley blood boiling in their veins as it burns in mine: you know how they have insulted me."

"Yes, I know that; it was only this week Gillian came with that queenly air of hers, and asked me to forbid your coming here. As if I would."

"And for these people, who treat you, at best, like an upper servant, you would keep me a beggar."

"No, no, not a beggar, Michael. You don't know how poor Sarah saved and pinched for the money Mrs. Frost had for bringing you up. I never could have done it like her. Oh, Michael! if she were only here now with her quick way of seeing things—but—but I should not dare look her in the face. Is not Gillian her daughter?"

"But she is not daughter to the man who owned all this wealth, nor shall she keep it! It never was hers by right. Why can't you see this as I do?"

"But the law gave it to him!"

"The law is a tyrant. Besides, the question was never contested. How do we know what the courts would have decided, had all the knowledge we possess been laid before them?"

The poor, nervous woman was yielding thought by thought to the strong will that oppressed her. Her heart was always in the right place, but the intellect which should have supported it wavered under the pleadings, and the sophistry which was so much like truth. Her

own heart, too, spoke loud in the young man's behalf; all her ambition—a childish feeling at best—rose up to second his arguments. Sure enough, why should Gillian Bentley have the right to sweep Michael Hurst so disdainfully from her path, as if he were a beggar and she an empress?

With these thoughts undermining the sense of right which was growing weaker and weaker each moment, with his pleading voice in her ears, the lone woman sunk quietly away from her integrity, and promised all that the young man asked of her.

Then he arose to go, like a child who, having taken the first step, fears to walk alone; she followed him, holding out her hands.

"Michael!"

He paused and came back, questioning her with his eyes; for he had no heart to understand the yearning tenderness that spoke in the word.

"Michael!"

His intellect was quick, and he comprehended that there was some weakness which he was expected to humor.

"Well," he said, smiling, "you see I have come back like a good boy: what is it?"

"Michael, kiss me for the first time on earth before you go."

The young man was visibly touched. He bent down, and as he kissed her he murmured a single word that sent a bloom into her face, and made every nerve in her frame vibrate. Truly she had bought that one moment of happiness with a great price.

She did not kiss him back, but received the touch of his lips with timid humility, sighing under the full contentment of her wishes.

"You will never speak of cursing me again?" she said wistfully, "the word hurts me like a knife."

"Never! Only be faithful to your promise, and we have neither of us any thing to fear."

He went away after this. Aunt Hetty locked the door and drew down the curtain with eager haste. When quite alone, and safe from observation, she sat down and pressed the two hands, which he had clasped, to her lips with fervor, as a devotee kisses the feet of his idol. She took up the cushion he had leaned against and smoothed it with caressing softness, laid her cheek against it, and muttered soft, sweet words over it, as if the embroidered silk knew all that she felt, and would grow brighter from sharing her joy.

Then she heard a step at the door, and a clear, young voice called out:

"Aunt Hetty, are you here? May I come in?"

It was Gillian's voice. The cushion dropped from Aunt Hetty's clasp, and, holding her breath with sudden terror, the poor creature sunk with it to the floor, afraid to speak.

Then came a repetition of the words, which broke into snatches of music at the end, and Gillian's light footstep died away in the hall; but the sound of her voice came back like the song of a nightingale when the rose season is at its full.

The young girl was very, very happy that day; Woodworth had just left her, and, like the bird we speak of, she carried her joy and her song everywhere she went. With her all was sunshine; but darkness had fallen upon the poor woman who sat upon the floor of that closed room, trembling under the light vibrations of her song.

"It is Sarah's child—it is Sarah's child," she muttered,

rocking to and fro, with both hands clasped over her knees, "and I have promised to destroy her: better as it was, oh, how much better as it was!"

Thus all that day she sat upon the floor bewailing herself, without the courage to do right or wrong

The next day Aunt Hetty was ill—so ill that she refused to leave her room, though the house was all in a tumult of preparation, and the gay world in a storm of excitement. This would undoubtedly prove the grand ball of the season: persons would be present who seldom appeared on such occasions; and to the usual crowd which composes a fashionable assemblage, the Bentleys would add many celebrities which no one else could command. In-doors the commotion was intense. Gillian, with her fine artistic taste, was busy as a bee turning the stately mansion into a bower of Eden for that one night.

Clothed in her morning-wrapper, which floated around her like a cloud, Gillian was in fifty places at once, smiling and radiant, giving gleams of new beauty to every thing she touched. While Martha tried on her dress at least half a dozen times; and Dinah, to use her own words, made dem city niggers from de confectionariums stand 'bout, while she gave an opinion of every thing which was brought into the supper rooms.

Now and then Mr. Bentley was called from his books to give an opinion where some statue was to be moved, or a picture lighted up; but of all the household Aunt Hetty never appeared.

CHAPTER XXIX.

OPENING OF THE BALL.

THE house was lighted up from roof to basement. The windows were one blaze of gold, ruby, or azure, as the silken draperies through which the rays passed chanced to be tinted. A fine, weeping elm that drooped its branches at one end of the house seemed bathed in sunshine, so rich was the flood of light that poured through the painted glass of the bay windows. The marble vases that lined the broad steps to the front entrance gleamed out like snow beneath the contrast of the trailing leaves and gorgeous blossoms that crowded them. The folding-doors were constantly open, and a broad pavement of light fell to the street, where a curious crowd was gathered to watch the guests as they descended from their carriages.

Within all was equally brilliant. The library and Gillian's boudoir, which opened from it, were thrown together in rich contrast, like two grand pictures of the ancient school, a Rembrandt and a Guido. The one, so deep in shadows, that a world of light seemed absorbed in revealing it; the other, so fresh and fairy-like, that it seemed as if Aurora herself must have prepared it for her train.

In the library, bronzes and dark carvings gave depth and richness to harmonize with its crimson draperies. In the boudoir, statues and statuettes of pure white marble

grouped their snowy limbs under clouds of azure and lace drapery, looped back from the windows by garlands of natural roses, that sent their breath in among the heavy books, and played with the golden light of the chandeliers in the library. In one window a Hebe vase of alabaster, classic and stately, was tinted red by the blossoms of a fuchsia that drooped over it. The curtains of another were held away from the windows by a laughing Bacchante, who seemed to have forgotten the grapes which he grasped triumphantly in his uplifted hands. In a little recess, which opened upon a balcony, a marble Cupid lay asleep literally on a bed of roses, for fresh blossoms breathed all around him, on his snowy couch and over his delicate limbs, blending their pink light with his smiles, till he seemed to laugh in his dreams. The carpet was soft and fleecy, like a bed of soft snow, over which the Cupids, on the exquisitely frescoed ceiling overhead, had been pelting fresh flowers all the day long.

Every thing in this room was cloud-like and vapory. The floating lace, the sleeping statues, and the roguish Cupids overhead seemed pervaded by a silvery mist, for the light came moonlike through a partition of plate-glass, that alone shut out a conservatory beyond.

Through this translucent partition glowed sheets of azalaes, rhododendrons, and golden-leaved acacias, with other rare tropical plants all in full flower, over which globes of ground glass shed their soft moonlight, which penetrated to the boudoir, revealing it like a dream.

Into this room Gillian came alone to meet her lover, one happy moment before the company poured in. Down she glided along the broad staircase, pure as snow and bright as a sunbeam. Fold upon fold—fold upon fold of delicate lace enveloped her. Silvery tulle over net, and above that

the gossamer richness of Brussels point, with traceries that seemed like frost-work forming as she moved, gleamed and floated around her. From the coronet of hair that circled her queenly head fell a triple vail of tulle, like mist tinted through and through by the prism; azure, white, rose-color, and pale violet fell over her dress as the morning tints a cloud, and through this her face shone out resplendent in its loveliness, for the thought of meeting him had scattered rose-leaves on her cheek, and filled her eyes with love-light. She was indeed what her dress proclaimed her, "Queen of the Morning!"

Woodworth was in the boudoir waiting. He saw her enter the library and glide through. She approached the boudoir, not with her usual self-possession, but like a child who longs to be admired, and is yet ashamed of the desire. That night Gillian panted to be beautiful, but love made her diffident, so she came in blushing and half-abashed. Woodworth held his breath; she seemed so much like one of those creations of Guido which never seem quite of earth, that he stood lost in pleasant surprise. She came close to him, wondering why he did not speak.

One little hand stole out from under the cloud of her vail and touched his arm. He prisoned the white hand in his, and thus they stood together in the moonlight that beamed from the conservatory, smiling on each other, but silent. Perfect love has no language, and requires none. With those eyes upon her face, Gillian knew that she was becoming more and more beautiful every moment. She felt like an angel; he thought that she looked like one.

A few words were murmured after this, fragmentary nothings, I dare say, but very sweet and musical to them. Before it could become conversation, the unwelcome

sound of footsteps in the vestibule made them draw apart, and directly a lady, who seemed to have glided out of Louis the Fifteenth's court, came into the library and moved slowly toward them.

Gillian looked upon the intruder with surprise, for she seemed a perfect stranger. In all her list of friends she remembered no one so queenly in her presence, so impressed with an air of command.

The dress, an old-fashioned brocade of apple-green and silvery white, looped up with ribbons from an under skirt of rose-colored silk, was of regal richness. The tall head-dress, powdered, puffed, and woven in with jewels; the plume of snowy feathers on one side, and the fall of a glowing rose back from the left temple, were gorgeous, but subdued by powder; while the neck and arms gleamed whitely through a profusion of yellow old lace, and the stomacher blazed with jewels.

"Who can it be?" whispered Gillian, gazing upon the lady, whose face seemed to possess scarcely a familiar line. "One would think she had stepped out of a picture but for these bright eyes. Who can she be?"

"Hush! she is in search of us. I know her, and yet cannot imagine who she is," whispered Woodworth, drawing Gillian back to his side. "She is evidently looking for some one."

The lady entered, saw Gillian, and came forward.

"My dear Miss Bentley, and you also my friend," she said, with cheerfulness, evidently forced, for her voice was husky.

Gillian gave a little start, and then broke into a birdlike laugh.

"Mrs. Ransom—oh, my dear Mrs. Ransom! I am so glad you have come! I waited and waited up-stairs,

thinking that you might want help about your dress; but it is perfect: I never saw such a change: who on earth would recognize you? I shall have to introduce you twice over to papa; he will never get the least idea of you in this splendid costume."

"So you would not have known me?" said Mrs. Ransom. "Well, I am glad of it—one does not bring every-day life into a scene like this. If I do no discredit to 'this fair morning,' it is enough."

"But your dress is so brilliant, and your face so pale," cried Gillian. "Is it these pretty patches, or are you nervous? I never saw you so white before."

Mrs. Ransom laughed rather hoarsely.

"Oh, that is a trick of the toilet which Ruby will explain when you ask her; but let me look at you both. Indeed, is it so? Can such happiness exist and endure? God bless you both!"

"Why, how you tremble! how cold your hand is!" cried Gillian, warming the chilled hand with her kisses.

"It is the new sensation of coming into a crowd: don't mind it; but tell me if Mr. Bentley has consented."

"Generously, nobly," said Woodworth. "Oh, Mrs. Ransom, he is a prince among men."

"He is—he is——"

Mrs. Ransom uttered these words so impressively that Gillian and Woodworth looked at each other. Mrs. Ransom saw the glance, and went on, catching her breath as she spoke.

"Every one says that. It is a beautiful thing to be so respected, so thoroughly beloved. Your father should be a very happy man, Gillian."

She spoke feverishly, and her eyes kindled.

"My father is too sensitive, too solitary in his habits

for happiness, but he is good, wise, and generous, and these things are great blessings. To-night he has promised to be very, very happy—but I saddened him only a few minutes since. It seemed as if I never wanted a mother so much in my whole life as I do this evening. I told him so, and it brought tears into his eyes. I tried to caress him into cheerfulness again, but he shrunk away from me; so I was a little mournful for the time. But *he* is here, and you have come: what more can I want? There, there is papa now looking for us. One moment, Mrs. Ransom!"

Gillian hurried forward into the library and met her father half-way. Mrs. Ransom took Woodworth's arm, leaning heavily upon it. She saw Gillian coming forward dimly like a cloud followed by a dark shadow.

"Mrs. Ransom—my father, Mr. Bentley."

Julia heard the words, and moved forward under a chandelier in the library. Bentley saw a fine woman glittering with jewels. Her eyes shone upon him like stars reflected deep in a lake; but she seemed too pale for a woman of robust health, which was evident from the round fullness of her person. The unnatural contrast of her face and her person struck him with a sort of chill. But he could not remove his eyes from her gaze. She had fascinated him by a look, as she had thousands and thousands by her genius. Though a recluse, in many respects, Mr. Bentley had seen too much of society not to feel that some words of hospitality were expected from him; but he could not speak them: the very presence of this woman enthralled his senses.

She did not seem embarrassed, but excited and eager; her lips parted, her hands trembled visibly. She looked down at them and seemed terrified by her own agitation.

"You see how society affects me," she said, turning desperately to Woodworth. "Bring me a glass of water—I pray you bring me a glass of water."

She was evidently faint; her parted lips were white as snow; the lids trembled over her eyes. She staggered; Bentley threw his arms around her or she would have fallen. As it was, a shudder passed through her frame, and she was sinking from his arm to the floor.

Gillian caught her with both arms, for her father seemed paralyzed.

"Help me lift her, papa; she is quite gone; her cheek is cold as death."

This plea aroused Bentley—his eyes kindled—he grew strong.

"Give her to me entirely," he said, bearing her to a sofa. "She is evidently, like me, oppressed by the idea of this crowd."

He laid her softly on the sofa, while Gillian arranged the cushions, and knelt down, listening for a breath from those cold lips.

"Oh, father, is she dead?" cried Gillian, startled by the strangeness of his face.

"I do not know," he said, vaguely; "but it seemed just now as if some one had died a second time. Have you any strange feeling of bereavement, Gillian?"

"I had, an hour ago, while thinking of my mother; but now I tremble with anxiety to see this dear lady look up."

"Your mother!" cried Bentley, starting up with a gesture of sudden pain. "Gillian, a moment since this woman lay upon my bosom. It was your mother's place till—till—girl, how dare you ask me to lift that form in these arms!"

"I thought she was dying, papa."

"And so she is, perhaps," answered Bentley, with sudden gentleness. "We are cruel to bring old regrets here. Why does not Woodworth come with the water?"

"He is here! he is here!" cried Gillian, meeting Woodworth and taking the goblet from his hand. "Now, papa, if you would leave the room and get a little more calm."

"Calm, child! I am calm!"

"It is terrible to see any one so close to death," said Woodworth, lifting Julia's head, and attempting to force the water through her lips, "and she the most noble of human beings; this paleness frightens me."

Bentley took one of the hands that fell downward toward the carpet; a pulse leaped into the wrist as he touched it, and the palm grew warm against his.

"She is better," he said, unconsciously clasping the hand—"much better. Speak, dear lady, and tell me if I am right."

She did not answer; but he felt her fingers tighten around his, while a tremor passed over her mouth.

"Yes, I am better. Oh, if this were death now!"

She whispered this, faintly struggling, as it were, not to grow strong or entirely conscious.

That instant the voice of Aunt Dinah penetrated to the library, and the sound of her feet, patting across the floor of the vestibule, gave a promise of vigorous help.

"Where am she, I says? What am all dis touse 'bout, takin' off der glasses from der tables afore meal-time, and raisin' ole Scratch gin'rally? What lady am it as guvs up afore der fun begins? I'm a'most out o' breath climbing to dat chist. Den der lock got obstrop'rous and wouldn't work, and I got mad—bang! open it flew, and here's a bottle ob der best camfire dat ebber cum under

dis ruff; I certifies to dat, anyhow, I does. Miss Gillian, where am der indervideral? jist p'int her out."

Before any one could speak, Dinah saw Mrs. Ransom lying on the sofa, and darted toward her the more vigorously as a carriage that moment rolled up to the door. Without pause or caution she gathered the palm of her withered hand into a hollow, filled it from the flask, and dashed it into Mrs. Ransom's face with a suddenness that made the poor lady gasp painfully.

"Bring her to in no time!" cried Dinah, triumphantly, filling her palm again. "Jes see der color come ter 'er mout'; but den dis yer camfire is strong 'nough to stand 'lone. None ob yer city potticary stuff dat yer. Hab ter cork up tight ter keep alive, but sharp as horseradish an' stingin' as mustard. Am yer 'viving, marm? Der yer feel dis yer camfire burnin' from der crown ob yer head ter de soles ob yer feet? 'cause if yer don't I'se on hand for t'odder dose."

"Foolish old woman, I am better," murmured Mrs. Ransom, dreamily. "Don't disturb me again; I want to sleep."

"What? how? Foolish ole woman! foolish ole woman! Now dis indervederal hasn't had der honor of a 'duction, an' she calls me ole woman: dat's manners 'mung white folks, I 'spose."

Dinah was so exasperated that she gave her head a vigorous toss, and handed her camphor bottle to Woodworth, with the air of a marshal of France resigning his baton in disgust.

"I 'spect when Miss Gillian twisted dis turben round my head, and 'vested me with dis silk gown, she wasn't 'specting ter see de owner 'sulted; but I'll detire till dis

yer lady comes ter a sense ob her sitivation an' mine. Ole woman! wonder what she calls ole—ugh!"

Mrs. Ransom smiled as one laughs in a dream; but when Mr. Bentley quietly rebuked Dinah and sent her from the room, she seemed to recover her faculties with a start, and sat up, looking earnestly around.

"Have I been ill?" she said, turning her eyes on Gillian—"ill and troublesome?"

"Ill, dear lady, but not troublesome."

She looked eagerly around.

"There was some one else here—or am I mistaken?"

"An old colored woman, whom we all spoil terribly, went out a moment since, after half-smothering you with comphor, that is all!"

"An old colored woman? I wish she had stayed a moment longer."

"Shall we call her?" said Woodworth.

"No, no; hark! carriages—another, and I detaining you all here. It is unpardonable!"

She started up, and arranged her dress with haste, keeping her eyes averted from the little group of friends.

"Now," she said, smoothing the lace over her elbows and arranging the folds of her dress, "shall we go back to the pretty room yonder? I shall not faint again, depend on it. Hark, the first group is coming. Let us go!"

Mr. Bentley offered his arm. Mrs. Ransom scarcely touched it as she appeared to lean upon him. She was self-sustained now, either by fever or excitement, for her cheeks were red as tea-roses, and her eyes took the glance of an eagle. She looked younger by ten years than when she entered the room.

And now the crowd came pouring in through the bril-

liant library into the moonlight of the boudoir, chatting, laughing, and treading time to imaginary music; charmed by the beauty of the young hostess, wondering that a woman who wrote such books could live, talk, and move like other people, they passed on through the blooming labyrinths of the conservatory, and into the great drawing-room. Here the floors were elaborately ornamented for dancing; and a temporary gallery was occupied by the band, whose music soon rang through the building.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE FIRST WALTZ.

And now the house was filled. Brilliant groups passed every moment from their silken-lined carriages to the dressing-rooms overhead, and down the noble staircase again, chatting, gliding, and full of sweet noises, like tropical birds when the forests are in flower. The murmur and hum of enjoyment ran from room to room, for groups of the gay revellers might be found among the shadows of the conservatory, in the moonlight of the boudoir, or the stronger brilliancy of the library. Everywhere that night pleasure reigned triumphant; but happiest of all was the fair mistress of the revel, and most brilliant of all was her friend, Mrs. Ransom. She had shaken off her temporary indisposition, and gave out the brightness of her genius like a star,

scattering wit and courteous sayings around her, as the German prince cast jewels from his vestments, reckless where the bright things fell. Wherever she was, a cloud of rustling silks, vapory laces, and waving feathers was certain to collect, for Gillian was sure to be near, and like two genii they reigned together, the one by her brightness and her beauty, the other by a power of genius that was irresistible.

Martha Hart, too, flitted through the rooms like a bird. With a dainty basket of flowers poised on her head, and a muslin apron gathered up in one hand, through which came the red glow of roses, she went from group to group bargaining for her flowers, full of wholesome glee and wit, not the less pleasant that it was a little saucy. In the distance, always in the distance, and fluttering on the outskirts of the crowd, was a little, pale woman, looking wildly from face to face as if in search of some one. Sometimes she spoke furtively to the flower girl, who always answered with a careless laugh.

"Has he come, aunt? Indeed I do not know. Why should you or I trouble ourselves about him?" Then she would begin to hum,

"I've been roaming, I've been roaming,
Where the summer dews are sweet,"

and take wing again.

"Will you dance with me?" said a soft voice at her elbow.

"Will I dance with you, Mr. Hurst? Of course; but it is a waltz, or something that I never danced except alone with Gillian; but she is standing up too. Yes, yes, I'll be ready in a moment."

She darted off in search of Aunt Hetty, and found her

on an iron seat in the conservatory, at an angle that commanded a view of the boudoir and drawing-room. She looked wild and anxious as Martha came up.

"Have you found him?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, and we are going to dance."

"Dance! What, he dance to-night?"

"Yes, yes, do make haste and unfasten the basket from my head; there, undo the ribbons; all right; now hold it till I come back, or, if you get tired, put it on the seat; I can find it again. Now give me a pin: I want to fasten up my apron so that the roses cannot spill out. Now, I'm off."

"Stop, stop. Are you going to dance with him—with Michael Hurst?"

"Dance! that isn't the word, aunt. I'm going to waltz, to whirl around in this fashion, do you see?" She bent her left arm, pressed the hand to her side, and gave a whirl that sent her muslin robe dashing against the glowing shrubs that rained a storm of petals over her. As the bright leaves fluttered in the folds of her dress, she darted away, calling out,

"Take care of my basket, Aunt Hetty, or leave it, if you like, and come see us dance."

Yes, Aunt Hetty had no reason for sitting there behind the plants any longer. Hurst was in the crowd: she would search for him there—she would do any thing to shake off the harassing anxiety that was almost killing her. In her dark dress she might pass for a nun or sister of charity, and so speak with him and no one observe it.

She left Matty's pretty basket on the chair, and wandered off lonely as if she had been in a wilderness.

The waltz was at its height, and the crowd in a whirl of excitement. Here a Cleopatra swam by in the arms of a

Roman senator; fair Greeks whirled past supported by Turkish pashas; and sons of the war-path flirted with novices of the white vail.

Aunt Hetty was bewildered and shocked. To her the people seemed going mad: she was crowded to the wall, and leaned against it out of breath and frightened. Among the whirl of dancers she could distinguish no one; and her heart was bent on speaking to Hurst; she could endure that torture of apprehension no longer.

A lady came and stood beside her—a tall, stately woman in the prime of mid-age, but who looked grand and youthful compared to her. The flash of jewels on her bosom, as the light struck aslant on them, made Aunt Hetty shut her eyes. The gorgeous brightness pained them. The lady, as if unconsciously, rested one hand on Aunt Hetty's shoulder; she seemed weary and heavy-hearted. Notwithstanding all her splendor, there was something to pity in that sad face.

"Are you tired?—would you like a seat, madam?" said the little woman, shrinking beneath the touch of that strange hand as if it pained her.

The lady dropped her hand slowly, and looked down at the speaker. What a wild, troubled face it was that she gazed upon! The hair, parted so smoothly beneath her cap, seemed scattered with ashes. Alas! when gray hairs appear before their time, they usually spring from the ashes of dead hopes, the bitterest kind known to humanity.

Mrs. Ransom could not turn her eyes from Aunt Hetty's face; something in the expression smote her to the heart. She noticed the little feet moving restlessly on the floor—the hands clasping and unclasping themselves under the black lace scarf—the arm, with its hair bracelet, from

which a locket fell, containing the mingled tresses of two females, fair and dark, curling together. At last the lady spoke, but there was anguish in her voice.

"Yes, I am tired—ill I fear. Is there no place in which I can rest a moment? No private room where I should not be an intruder?"

"I—I will go up with you to my own chamber—that is always quiet; but excuse me if I do not stay: I must be here; oh, they are coming now! Mr. Hurst—Mr. Hurst, one moment!"

She darted forward as Hurst and Martha Hart went circling by among the dancers, and made a grasp at the young girl's dress. The apron gave way; all the roses it contained fell to the floor, and were scattered abroad by a sweeping whirl of the next couple.

"Oh, aunt! how could you?" cried Martha, panting for breath, as she retreated from the circle. "See my poor roses, and my torn apron! It's too bad."

Aunt Hetty did not heed her—did not even know the mischief she had done.

"Hurst—Hurst, I must speak to you," she said, with desperate resolution.

"Well, be quick then, or we lose our place in the ring. Oh, Mrs. Ransom! more beautiful than ever! This is a splendid affair. I enjoy myself with a zest; how is it with you?"

"I am beyond the age when gayety enchants," she said, gravely; "but this lady desires to speak with you: she has been very anxious. Go with her."

The words were softly spoken, but they seemed like a command.

Hurst whispered a few words to Martha, and followed Aunt Hetty to the conservatory. Gillian and Woodworth

whirled by him as he went down the room. He started back as a rattlesnake coils for a spring, and the hate that shot from his eyes was venomous.

Mrs. Ransom was watching him. She saw the look, but thought the dancers had, perhaps, trod on him as they whirled by; and knowing his evil temper, this was enough to explain his evident wrath.

After a little time, the two came back. Hurst was excited; his cheek burned like fire, and he cast stern glances at the little woman, which made her shrink like a threatened child.

"Come," he said, seizing Martha almost rudely by the waist, "let us see who will be crowded from the track."

He gave the young creature a fierce whirl, and dashed in among the dancers like a storm.

An humble, heart-broken look had settled on Aunt Hetty; she was nervous no longer, but all the strength had left her limbs. Mrs. Ransom put one arm around her, and all the beauty of her countenance shone forth.

"Has he been unkind?" she whispered.

"He!—who?" said Aunt Hetty, with a wild look.

"Oh, I had forgotten that we are strangers," said Mrs. Ransom with a sigh; "but you seemed troubled, and one sometimes forgets proprieties where sympathy is strong."

"Troubled—I? Who said that? I am naturally a still person—a poor, nervous creature, they call me; but as for trouble, what trouble can a woman have who is so much alone?"

Mrs. Ransom felt the frail form shrink and tremble against her arm. She tightened its clasp a little and whispered,

"But I am both weary and ill; where is the room you promised?"

Aunt Hetty aroused herself.

"Yes, I can stay with you now: it is all over; when one is too weak for a struggle rest ought to come. Follow me through the supper-room: it is the shortest way."

She seemed glad to cast the protecting arm away, and moved through the crowd to a side door, which she opened cautiously. Mrs. Ransom glided after her, and in a moment they stood in the supper-room, over which Dinah was presiding in her gorgeous turban and flaming gown; oriental in her despotism as in her dress.

"So yer hab come ter take a look afore dey tousle ebbery ting up," she said, marching toward them with patronage in every gesture. "Jes 'serve dat pyramid all ob sugar candy, an' dat heap ob cake white as a tub of curd—an' der glass, twinkling like ice, and de silver baskets a-running over wid strawberries, an' grapes, an' tings dat de Lord never 'tended to grow tergether, an' dat never would if it hadn't been for dem hot-houses. 'Serve dem wines in de 'canters, an' de regiment ob glasses, red, yaller, green. Golly, ain't it a show? I wonders what dem ornary folks at de corner 'ill say when I tells 'em 'bout it?"

But Dinah's eloquence was exhausted in vain. Mrs. Ransom scarcely gave a glance at the tables, glittering with cut-glass, silver, and china, all laden, and tinted with fruits, wines, and rich masses of flowers, glowing out from a ground-work of snow. She was too deeply occupied by her own thoughts to heed the picture, beautiful as it was.

"Humph!" muttered Dinah, as the two women glided through her domain, "der am something in dat ar passage of Scripter as tells 'bout feeding pigs wid pearls, and t'ings ob dat sort."

And she consoled herself with a glass of wine, which she called three waiters to pour out for her, taking plenty of time, as they stood in obsequious attendance, to decide on the color of glass which should be honored by an approach to her lips.

Mrs. Ransom followed Hetty Hart into her room. She looked around, with interest, as if searching among the objects the chamber contained for some idea of its inmate. Nothing was there which bespoke individuality. Furniture, rich in itself, but evidently uncared for, occupied such places as the chambermaid appropriated to it. There was no home-look, and seemed to be no home-feeling in the room. It was a place in which Hetty Hart sometimes shut herself up, and that was all.

"There is a bed," said Aunt Hetty, wearily, "if you wish to lie down; and easy-chairs, if you like them better. Excuse me, but I am unable to talk. This night has almost killed me."

Aunt Hetty sunk to a couch, as she spoke, and held her head between both hands. Mrs. Ransom looked at her a moment with strange interest, and at last sat down on the couch.

"It is no common distress that makes you so weak," she said, very compassionately. "I have experience, and some power; if any one on earth can help you, confide in me. I am to be trusted, believe me."

Aunt Hetty dropped her hands, and looked around eagerly, as if about to open her heart; but her countenance contracted again, and she turned moodily away without speaking.

"And you will not trust me! According to your own account, this nervousness—this vague terror which comes and goes on your face—unfits you for a struggle with real

difficulties. Why not take counsel then? Why not take help? Both are offered in good faith."

Mrs. Ransom paused; but Aunt Hetty only made a faint negative movement of the head.

"If money is wanting," she went on to say. But Aunt Hetty gave that same mournful wave of the head. Like all weak persons she was obstinate in a negative, and in refusing to do any thing could be firm enough.

Mrs. Ransom was greatly troubled. She saw that some positive anxiety preyed upon the helpless creature at her side; and, full of kindness, ardent in her benevolence, she felt certain of the power to sweep this evil aside, could she but learn its nature.

"Then you will not speak?" she said.

Aunt Hetty became impatient. Of late fits of fretful irritability would seize upon her, and she, the quietest of human beings, would repulse kindness almost with insult.

"I have nothing to tell—nothing to say. Cannot a poor woman have a headache, or be a little vexed, without the whole world forcing itself upon her? I don't know you, ma'am. God help me! I scarcely know any one. In the whole world there never was such a lorn creature. They call me an 'old maid,'" she added, with a weak laugh, "and you know what fretful creatures they always are."

Mrs. Ransom arose and walked the floor. What could she effect with a character like that! With all her genius she had no power to overcome that inert obstinacy which fear makes strong. Still she could not abandon the poor creature, whose sole wish was to conceal that she suffered. She sat down again, but Aunt Hetty moved on the couch to avoid her.

"Who are you?" she said, impatiently. "I ask you

here, because you look tired, but you will neither lie down yourself nor let me rest."

"I am a lone woman, like yourself."

"Like me! Like me!"

"Worse! for I cannot be resigned. I struggle and suffer: you bow to the storm; I brave it."

"That is the way Sarah used to talk."

"And who was Sarah?"

"My sister. Oh, my God! my God! why did I mention her? What if she were here now! Tell me—for they pretend that you know every thing—tell me if spirits do come back? If they ever know what we are doing here? Oh, don't look at me with those great eyes. I have no secret for you to search out. Only tell me this one thing."

"I have no knowledge beyond this life—no means of knowledge which the Bible does not give to you as well."

"The Bible! I will not search that. I have not touched the Bible since—almost since I came here."

"Read it then."

"No! no!"

"Let me read it for you: it will tranquillize us both."

"While the house is shaken with dancers, and wine is running like water in the rooms below! This is no place or time for the Bible. Hark! they are laughing loud now!"

Mrs. Ransom started up.

"No! that was a shriek—a cry of anguish! Great heavens! it comes again! Something has happened!" She opened the door and fled down the long passages; but Hetty Hart fell upon the couch and began to moan.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MASTER OF THE FESTIVAL.

From the moment his guests began to assemble, Mr. Bentley, whose delicate organism was but little in keeping with such scenes, felt himself giving way to a strange, nervous depression. The brilliant assembly laughing, dancing and chattering around him, seemed like persons in a dream, surrounding him with splendid gayety that made his heart ache.

Of all the persons in those rooms but two stood out distinct and real before him. Those two were Gillian, his beautiful, beautiful daughter, and Mrs. Ransom, the author, whose presence became so fascinating, and yet so painfully irksome, that every sense and faculty of his being was aroused in strange antagonism. Her voice smote his ear as something unnatural which he had buried among other pains long ago. Her bearing, so proud and imperial, seemed to drive back a thousand tender memories that disturbed him without taking definite form. But he stood in the centre of those princely rooms, apparently calm and gracious as became the host of a fashionable assembly. Many a gentle hand-clasp, many a smiling welcome passed his lips of which he was but vaguely conscious. Though delicate and sensitive beyond ordinary men, he had a power of habit—the strong will which conceals what the world cannot understand—and these gave to his de-

meanor all that the occasion required—life, politeness, and calm elegance.

But when the guests were all assembled—when the music rang out loud, and the floor trembled beneath the whirling dancers—when figures flitted two by two in and out of the conservatory, coquetting, as it seemed, with the flowers, and merriment reigned supreme everywhere—he stole away up the grand staircase, and into a little room in which he kept a desk and some papers, with a few choice books of devotion. This little room was to him an oratory of the heart; the plain table that stood within it, an altar; and the Bible which lay upon that was a guide to that peace he never hoped for on earth.

Every thing was plain and simple in this room. The shutters were closed, and a lamp burned on the table. A faint hum of the revelry below reached it; but the music was so distant that it sounded mournful to him; and the pale light seemed quiet and serene after the floods of brilliancy he had just left. He sat down in a chair near the table, and dropping his forehead into the hollow of one hand sighed heavily.

"What is this?" he murmured, audibly. "Has time, which works wonders to other men, no power with me? Years piled on years are insufficient to build a wall between me and that miserable time. What has chanced to-night? Who has crossed me in any thing, that I feel this dreary old pain come back so sharply? I did think—God help me!—I did think that this fête would do something for me, that in the triumph and beauty of my child some little ray of joy or ambition might come back; but it is a failure. God help me! my whole life has been a failure."

The hand which supported his forehead slid down to his eyes; the quivering fingers pressed themselves together

an instant, and then were quickly withdrawn; while two or three bright drops flashed by the lamp and settled darkly on the table, the rain of a heavy heart.

While his eyes were yet misty with tears, a footstep approached the door of his retreat—a heavy footstep that had no business there, for in that room Mr. Bentley never received message or visitor. There was not a servant in the family who would have dared to approach him while in that part of the house. With the quick impatience which follows hidden grief of any kind, he turned upon his chair and looked almost fiercely at the door. It opened, and young Hurst came in, smiling blandly, as if certain of a pleasant welcome.

"I saw you retire from the drawing-room," he said, "and made an attempt to follow you earlier; and but for a little scene in the hall between your pretty niece and some person in the costume of a rustic, who saw fit to question my right to waltz with her cheek so close to mine, I should have accomplished it."

Mr. Bentley arose from his chair, resting one hand upon the back. There was no other seat in the room, and he made no gesture to offer that. On the contrary, a look of repelling surprise met the flippancy of this speech.

"Sit down," said Hurst, blandly. "I did not expect a very cordial reception, but this is unpleasantly chilling. Sit down, sir. I will occupy a corner of the table while we converse, for I really have a little business which you must listen to."

While Mr. Bentley stood looking sternly upon him, Hurst pushed the Bible aside and seated himself upon the table, where he locked his hands over one knee, resting his heel on the edge.

"Yes," he said, pleasantly, "I have business important

to me, for it is a question of some millions of dollars—how many you will tell me by-and-by. Sit down, sir, I entreat: this conversation will be long enough to tire you out, unless you set a lighter value on my father's fortune than I can reasonably expect."

Mr. Bentley stood confounded by the young man's insolence. He was no pugilist to turn him out by force, and it was easy to see that the man before him was inaccessible to moral influences. He turned quietly, and was about to leave the room; but Hurst sprang up and dashed between him and the door, which he locked.

Retreating toward the table, with the key grasped tight in one hand, his whole countenance changed. The flippant air with which he had entered fled, and he confronted Mr. Bentley with a face as pale and stern as his own.

"I come on a serious business, sir, and will be heard!"

Mr. Bentley sat down. "If you have any business that can possibly excuse this intrusion, I am ready to listen."

Hurst did not sit on the table now, but leaned upon it with one hand, which brought his face more nearly on a level with Mr. Bentley's: for a moment he did not speak.

"I am waiting," said Mr. Bentley, with grave courtesy.

Hurst hesitated, and the hand upon which he leaned seemed to give way, for his whole body wavered; and his voice was so husky that he made one or two efforts to speak before he could utter a word.

"You—you had a cousin, sir, I believe—a cousin from whom you inherited all the fortune you possess?"

Mr. Bentley made a faint inclination of the head.

"But for this property you would have been, like myself, a poor young fellow living on his wits."

Mr. Bentley smiled. "But for that property I might have been a poor young fellow; but not, according to your meaning, living on my wits. While there was honest labor to perform I should have lived by that!"

"Every one to his taste. Let us keep close to the real subject. The wealth you inherited from your cousin is all you now own."

"So far as property can be unchangeable, yes. But unless these questions have a grave object, they are more than impertinent."

"Your Cousin Bentley was killed, I believe, on his way to the old homestead in Rockland county—a farm at that time mortgaged to him—killed by the upsetting of his carriage!"

Mr. Bentley grew ashen with the terrible recollection. He could not speak, the picture of that death had been so rudely placed before him; his head fell forward, and Hurst seized upon that as a confirmation of what he had asserted. He went on, harshly dragging the sensitive nature before him over the thorny past.

"When the elder Bentley left New York for Rockland county, did he tell you why he visited the old farm-house?"

Bentley arose from his chair pale as death.

"Young man, how dare you question me of these matters? By what right——"

He paused and drew back, trembling from head to foot. Something in the face of the young man struck him to the heart. It might have been in the expression—it might have been in the features; but something there was which held his breath and left him weak as a child.

Hurst smiled; he saw the paleness of that face, and un-

derstood the sudden suspicion that had seized upon the proud man, and felt it as a triumph.

"I question you of my father's death. Who will dispute the privilege of a son to seek knowledge?"

"Your father!"

The words came from his lips like fiery coals; the white face blazed out, and Bentley sprang upon the young man strong and fierce as a tiger. "Your father!—her child! Great God! save me from myself—save me—save me from murdering this thing!"

He fell back in his chair, with great beads of sweat trembling on his forehead; something of the gladiator broke from his eyes; and over his whole countenance came a look of unutterable loathing.

"What do you ask? Tell me what I can do or give to save my eyes from that face again?"

"You have nothing to give, sir. It is I who can play the benefactor—I, whom you have wronged out of name, property, every thing—I, the son of your Cousin Bentley, the just owner of his property, the master of this house."

"Property, name—take every thing, more than every thing; but if you would not make me a murderer, out of this room! out of my sight forever!" cried Bentley, shaking with terrible passion. "I cannot restrain myself: the sight of you makes a demon of me."

"If the very dread of poverty makes a fiend of you, its reality has not left me quite an angel, so beware how you carry insult too far!" said Hurst, in a voice made low and hoarse with rage.

Bentley sprang forward again with his arm outstretched and flecks of foam on his white lips. Hurst stepped aside, and the pale hand clenched in rage fell upon the Bible. Instantly the passion left that face, the drops

again started on the white forehead, and lowering his head Bentley cried out, "God forgive me!—oh! my God, forgive me!"

Then all was calm again. He sat down feebly, pressed one hand over his eyes, and looked up without shrinking.

"I can listen now," he said. "Be more explicit. You claim to be the son of William Bentley, if I heard you aright?"

"His son and heir, his only son, his legal heir."

A look of something more than astonishment shot over Bentley's face—a gleam that seemed almost like joy. Hurst looked upon him amazed by the impression made by words with which he had expected to crush the proud man.

"Was he married to her?"

"Do you require proof?"

"Proof! yes, positive, incontestible proof—nothing less should convict me as the cold-blooded tyrant I have been."

"They will be forthcoming," said Hurst, surprised and hesitating.

"Now—now, sir—if such proof exists—if you are his child—his legal son—give me a certainty of it."

"And will you then yield up my rights?"

This question was put in a low voice, and with a quailing of the eye of which Bentley, in his excitement, was unmindful.

"Your rights! Oh, you mean this property—William's property," answered Bentley, in a vague way, as if that branch of the subject had but just presented itself. "Who can doubt it? Her child—her lawful son—who can doubt it? But the proof—the proof!"

Hurst turned pallid—his hand shook perceptibly as it approached an inner pocket of his vest. Bentley's eyes

followed the hand so keenly that it seemed to wither beneath his glance, and fell down powerless. Bentley was white as snow; eyes, lips, and forehead—all were full of intense anxiety. When Hurst's hand fell he uttered a faint groan, as if disappointed.

"It is false then—all false—you have no such proof," he said, in a trembling voice. "It is cruel, sir, more than cruel, to raise such hopes wantonly."

"Hopes! Mr. Bentley?"

"Peace, sir! Do not dare to mock me again with romances, I have had enough of them. If it's not all a lie, say it at once; but remember I want facts, proofs—such facts, such proofs as a judge upon the bench decides from."

"They are here!" said Hurst, huskily, and drawing some papers from his pocket he laid them on the table.

Mr. Bentley looked on the papers a whole minute, without moving or seeming to breathe; then he slowly reached forth his hand, drawing one of the papers toward him. He held it between both hands, and slowly lowered it to the light. The paper dropped from his grasp, both hands were pressed to his heart, and falling back, Bentley uttered the cry which had startled Mrs. Ransom in Aunt Hetty's room.

Hurst stood a moment, gazing vaguely on the stricken man, who neither moved nor breathed. The sight of that paper seemed to be his death-blow. He lay prone in the chair, with one hand on his heart, the other falling heavily down. His lips were white, his eyes closed—nothing could have been more deathly.

Hurst was too much excited for judicious action. He really believed the man dead, and, selfish always, bethought himself first of his own safety. It would lead to

awkward questions if he were found alone with the master of that house either insensible or dead. He must get away and mingle with the crowd. Life would return to the helpless form before him, if it still existed; if not, there could be no use in his remaining.

With these thoughts chasing each other through his selfish brain, Hurst gave one frightened glance at that pale face, and left the room; for he heard footsteps approaching, and fled like a coward.

Yes, he heard footsteps approaching. Down through the dim corridor, breathless and eager, came a woman following the sound of that one cry, with a flight as sure as that of a mother bird when its young chirps for help. The pale, wild face shone out in contrast with the gorgeous antiquity of the dress, and the ghostly wave of white feathers kept the shadows in motion around her head. With an intuition keen as knowledge, Julia Ransom turned to the study door, opened it, and found Bentley apparently dead in his chair.

With a cry of terrible anguish, she bent over him and lifted his pale head to her bosom. She had no restorative —nothing but the touch of her trembling hands, and the breath of her lips. But she held him close, close to her bosom with both arms; and down upon his cold mouth she pressed her own, concentrating all the strength and warmth of her life to restore his.

Then she would draw back and look down upon the face, with such wild, wild terror in her glances, that they might have aroused a dead heart to beating. For the first time since we have known this woman the whole force of her nature broke forth, transfiguring her utterly.

Again she pressed her lips to the cold mouth, and laid her hand on the still heart. It beat very, very faintly;

but life was there. She was seized with terror at this, and grew still, holding her breath with a fear that he would come to and find his head on her bosom. She had no courage to remove it—no power to hush the swell of her own heart. All that she asked was that he should remain a little longer in that deathly state—a little longer resting there against her heart. So she held her breath, and grudgingly loosened her clasped arms, looking down upon him with such yearning—such intense, passionate tenderness.

What spirit of love and mercy was it that held those numb senses back according to her wish? Once the breath swelled softly in his chest, and the flutter of a pulse stirred his wrist, but Bentley neither opened his eyes nor attempted to move. Nay, as she gazed upon his face, illuminating it with her glances, it seemed as if a smile stole over the features. It might have been the lamp-light flickering over them, but certainly the coldness was gone.

Yes, the color came back—the smile parted his lips. He began to struggle faintly, and opened his eyes. He was alone in the room. The lamp shone and fluttered, as if a draught of air had swept it, but there was no visible presence.

Bentley stood up and looked around. Was it in truth a dream? Had he slept in his chair and been haunted with old memories? That scene with Hurst—was it a cheat of uneasy slumber? The circling arms, the heave of that full heart, the kisses which still seemed glowing on his mouth—had his youth come back in the mockery of a vision?

Certainly, it must be so! What man or woman would dare to enter that room? Yes, it was all a dream—the offshoot of excitement and exhaustion. Strange, though,

that young Hurst, a man in whom he had taken no interest, should have so wildly figured there; as for the rest, God help the unhappy man! it was only in sleep that his head could ever rest as it had done that night. All the joy he had gathered for years had been such husks stolen from delusions. No, no, it was all of a piece. He had been asleep and dreaming.

But, the sound of distant music—the tread of light feet vibrating through the entire building—the hum as of swarming bees—his own dress so elaborately rich—the white gloves which he had drawn off and laid on the table: these were realities. Then came the opening of that door—the young man sitting insolently on the table—the papers: no dream was ever so vivid as that. The rest was indistinct—a cheat of the heart; but this portion—why did it stand out so vividly?

While he pondered thus his eyes fell on the floor, and there lay a paper exactly like those he had been thinking of. He stooped, and held it to the light. It was a letter, old and yellow, directed to the Rev. J. Frost in *her* handwriting.

He looked wildly around. Some one had been there in his room. The papers were real. That letter—he had seen such before—one in the same handwriting, but with the name of a dead man, for the address had crushed all the joy from his life. He could not read this yellow old letter fluttering in his hand. What had he to learn? Why torture himself by duplicatory proofs against the dead?

But then came another memory—another paper—something that had stricken the very life from his system. Was that a reality?

At first he was seized with an impulse to rush down and find this man Hurst, who undoubtedly held some

power that was terrible over the past and the future; but dread of finding the vague idea that had seized upon him a delusion, kept him back. Besides, a sense of exhaustion still lay heavily upon him. He had neither the power to think nor act. So there he sat, with the paper in his hand, conscious that it was real, but unbelieving. It seemed impossible to separate what was true from that which must have been a delusion.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MARTHA HART'S FIRST POLKA.

In the meantime the rooms below had been the scene of some little revolt. Late in the evening a young man, in the holiday costume of a country farmer, had presented himself in the hall. Old Dinah, who was ubiquitous that evening, saw the young man, and gave him a welcome that quite astonished the other servants, who had remarked, hitherto, that her approbation was graduated by the splendor of costume which each visitor presented. But here was an exception; and Dinah not only condescended to receive the farmer guest, but preceded him, with her flowing dress and turban, through the suit of rooms, watching his amazement triumphantly, as if the whole establishment had been her own individual property.

As they passed into the drawing-room, Dinah halted.

"Dar!" she said, pointing to a couple that flitted in and out among the dancers, "there's her whizzin' 'bout like a top. Wait jes one minute, and I'll cotch her."

"What, that!—that girl with the bare arms and white shoulders! That girl, my—my—look here, old snow-ball, none of that, for I won't stand it!"

Dinah drew up, and her nose curled, in a small way, like the trunk of an elephant.

"Ole snow-ball! Well, dar, if dem isn't words to come out ob a gemman's mout' in de presence ob de fair sect, an' in scenes ob festialities like dis. If 'twasn't for despairing de blum ob my 'plexion, I'd blush for yer; as de 'casion is, I dus dat inside, hi!"

The young man did not heed her, but pushed forward into the crowd, where he could gain a better view of the dancers. A scene like that had never presented itself to the young countryman before. He had seen dancing, in a pleasant way, at a Fourth of July ball, and sometimes at an apple cut or husking, where tidy young girls, in white dresses and colored ribbons, went through a French four, or opera reel, with a certain rustic grace; but the scene before him was new even to his imagination: the whirl, the music, the euphonious tread of the dancers, the floating plumes, and cloud-like dresses bewildered, while the dance itself repulsed him. In all this crowd his eyes followed one couple only; and as they grew familiar to the scene, the color deepened on his ruddy cheek, and his eyes glittered with rage.

The polka, that most frivolous of all dances, had been introduced into society that season, making the old-fashioned waltz a puritanical affair in comparison. Into this last French inspiration the more reckless of the company had plunged, rushing up and down the room in pairs, stifling the first idea of an old-fashioned shuffle in its premonitory symptoms, and giving every indication of beginning some rather elaborate dance which failed utterly

in the completion. Tall men bent themselves into the form of an ancient bow, in order to clasp short ladies by the waist; and diminutive youngsters looked pert as quails, while aspiring to lift their shoulders to a convenient level for the queenly race of dancers.

Altogether the exhibition was a graceless affair in every way; and men of less inherent delicacy than John Downs might well have changed color on seeing it for the first time. The poor fellow grew red and white every instant, for there was pretty Martha Hart—the plump, wholesome, little Hebe—circled by the arm of a handsome young fellow, with her arm half round his neck, her cheek warm and red, leaning to his stooping face, her eyes sparkling, her heart panting beneath the pressure of his hand. Breaking up her steps and giving her pretty foot a stamp now and then, she whirled off like a rocket or went rushing like mad toward the conservatory, and back again into the crowd, all in a frenzy of motion, which ended in nothing but a repetition of the same silly manœuvre.

No wonder John Downs could not bear the sight—no wonder he thought of the time when, standing on the deck of that steamer, he had trembled while pressing the hand to his lips, which now lay so lovingly on a stranger's shoulder. His breath came heavily, his eyes gleamed, and he stood with his hand clenched hard, panting to knock the man down on the instant, and only withheld by the fact that half a score of other men were giving countenance to this impudent fellow's audacity.

Gillian was not dancing; she had practised the polka with Martha many a time, but that exquisite delicacy which springs from new-born love made her shrink from it now. So leaning upon Woodworth's arm, she moved

away among her guests, diffusing some of the bright happiness which glowed in her own heart all around.

She saw John Downs standing alone watching the dancers. It had been a kind thought with her when she sent a card for her ball to Martha's lover, hoping to surprise the dear girl into happiness like her own. But a glance from that wrathful face to the young girl and Michael Hurst, her partner, betrayed the mistake she had innocently made. With an anxious flush on her face, she went up to the young countryman, holding out her hand.

"Ah, Mr. Downs, how glad I am that you accepted my invitation!"

Downs started and took her hand softly, as if it had been a white rose, from which he feared the leaves would fall away.

"Ah, Miss, I—I didn't know what it was—I didn't expect——"

He broke off abruptly, and dropping her hand, turned his face away.

"Have you seen my father?"

"No, Miss, I haven't seen anybody, that is to speak of, except old Dinah, and she went off in a huff."

Gillian laughed sweetly, and quitting Woodworth's arm with a little imperative nod, took possession of the stranger.

"Come now, we will find him somewhere; by that time Cousin Matty will be through with her first polka."

"Her what?"

"Why, the dance you were looking at—we have practised it together so often. She never danced it with any one but me before; but ladies cannot dance together here, you know, and I was watching to see how she got on with Aunt Hetty's young friend—almost a relation, I might say,

for Aunt Hetty has known him since he was a boy, I believe—I am quite sure the dear old lady would not have been satisfied if Martha hadn't danced with him."

"Then it is to please Miss Hetty Hart that she dances this new fandangle?"

"I'm sure of it!" said Gillian, leading him away.

Downs turned his head over one shoulder and cast a lingering glance at the dancers.

"She—she don't seem in great trouble about it—she's willing enough, I'll be bound!" he said, with a gust of jealousy. "But I might have known how it would end."

Gillian felt a throb of compassion for the poor fellow. "What a terrible thing it must be to doubt any one!" she thought. "Besides, Martha does plunge into gayety this evening like a child. What shall I do?"

She was quietly forcing her companion away from the room, but he checked her near the conservatory, and wheeling round looked back upon the dancers. The music changed, Martha left the floor, it seemed a little reluctantly, for she shook her head and pouted, while Hurst searched for a seat and left her.

"One minute—please excuse me one minute, Miss Bentley; but I must speak with that chap before he gets away!"

Before Gillian could speak, Downs had dropped her hand from his arm, and hurried away through the crowd, following Hurst, who was softly stealing towards the vestibule, intent on the interview with Mr. Bentley which we have just described. Downs overtook him just as he was about to mount the stairs, and laid a heavy hand on his arm.

"I say, you sir, just one word. I've been watching

your way of dancing with a respectable man's daughter, and I don't like it. Do you understand?"

Hurst looked back at his questioner, laughed a little quiet laugh, and said:

"What the deuce do I care whether you like it or not?"

"But I will make you care, Mr. Jackanapes. The young lady is a—a friend of mine—or at any rate, her father is—and I won't see her innocent nature imposed on by any of you city gentlemen."

"Oh! I see you are a real countryman—no fancy character—an admirer of Miss Martha's, perhaps—no one could act the part so well With all my heart: I have no wish to interfere with you."

The young man spoke contemptuously, but with an evident wish to get rid of the whole thing.

"Then you have no interest? You don't care for the young lady?"

"Not a particle. Shouldn't care if she disappeared from the face of the earth in half an hour; so don't bore me about her, my good fellow."

Downs clenched his hand, while his face burned like fire.

"And it is with a fellow like you she—she—I tell you what, this air don't suit me. I never was so tempted to lock horns with an animal in my whole life!"

"Why, my dear sir, what have I done? Danced the polka—a confounded insipid affair, by-the-way—with a pretty girl who would never have forgiven me if I had not asked her. Go quarrel with her if you are in a particularly belligerent humor, for the fact is, she tired me out; I cannot boast of your athletic strength!"

"That's true," said Downs, unclasping his hand, and

looking very much like a great Newfoundland dog pitted against a terrier. "You arn't worth whipping, and wouldn't a-been worth minding but for the wrong you've done."

"Wrong! Now, my good fellow, do be reasonable. What harm is there in dancing the polka with a pretty girl?"

"What is the harm in brushing all the down from a ripe peach just as it takes its last red from the sun? What's the harm in dashing the purple dew from a plum? What's the harm of setting a coarse foot into new-fallen snow, that other coarse feet may tread after you? I'm a plain man, a farmer, and in driving cattle I get a rough way of speaking; but I'd as soon steal the blue eggs from a robin's nest, as lead any girl into exhibiting herself, as you have tempted the sweetest, the most innocent —Oh Jupiter! if you only had the muscle of a man, I'd break every bone in your body!"

"But only having a slight frame, and no inclination for battle, you will be good enough to let me pass on; especially as the servants are amusing themselves with your gestures and rather loud conversation."

Downs looked around, and saw that a group of idle waiters had gathered near them; and in their midst stood Aunt Dinah grimly regarding him. With a lofty shake of the turban she came forward.

"Now I isn't gwine ter see yer maken an obstreperous fool ob yerself and not 'pose my 'thority, if yer did call me olprobationary names," she said, with an accession of dignity, that, in spite of his annoyance, made Downs laugh. "Ain't yer 'shamed ob yerself, a-bringin' up der apperlations ob 'spectable young ladies to raise a muss 'bout? I'm 'shamed an' 'stonished, I is, John Downs; whar's yer 'scretion? whar's yer broughten up—whar?"

Under cover of this authoritative remonstrance, which edified the waiters immensely, Hurst made his escape, and from that scene went into the private room of Mr. Bentley, whose very existence seemed shaken by that visit.

Downs returned to the festal rooms ashamed of his recent outbreak, and anxious to apologize for the rudeness of his departure from Miss Bentley: perhaps, too, he hoped that some excuse or explanation of Martha's offence might meet him. So, in a state of contrition, and but half-subdued excitement, he went into the library and was swept on by the living current that crowded through the rooms. All at once he came upon Gillian. She was standing with one arm around the naughty flower-girl, who looked very subdued and depressed, like a child that had been unexpectedly called up for punishment in the midst of play.

John took a little circuit in the crowd, and came close up to the young girls as they stood together. All his anger had left him at the sight of that pretty, clouded face, and compunction for his violence rendered him diffident as if he had been the culprit. He dared not speak, nor touch her, but stood holding his breath, afraid to move.

"What did you let him go for? How could he act so unfeelingly? It's too bad!" There was a sob in Martha's voice, and she began biting the corner of her embroidered handkerchief in sorrowful anger, repeating again and again, "It's too bad—it's too bad!"

John's heart rushed to his mouth, and he was about to speak, when Martha broke forth again:

"I wish you hadn't invited him."

"Who?" said Gillian, "Michael Hurst?"

"Michael Hurst! No, but John Downs."

Here John shrunk back with a heart like lead.

"But I thought it would give you pleasure—that you liked him."

John did not breathe

"What is the good of liking him?" cried Martha, with tears in her eyes. "He hates, he despises me, and all because of that hateful Hurst, just as if I cared for him or thought of him; a post would have been just the same if it kept step, I'm sure."

Again Downs felt his heart rising.

"I never thought of him once while we were rushing about there. It seemed nice enough when you and I practised: didn't you think so, Gillian? and now I can't bear the idea of it. Oh, how I hate that Mike Hurst!"

John Downs was trembling all over now. His quick breath caught Gillian's attention: a glance and she stole away.

"Martha."

Martha Hart gave a dainty shriek, and struggled a little to get her hand away from the strong fingers that grasped it.

"I—I wonder how you dare, Mr. Downs. I thought you had gone for good—indeed I hoped so."

"It is not too late, Martha," said the young man, forgetting, in the pain of her present coquetry, the words she had uttered a moment before, "Good-night!"

Martha looked frightened; her fingers clung around his; and she gave him a glance from her fine eyes that would have brought an eagle to her feet.

"Yes, go. Good-night!" cried the little rogue, tightening her clasp, "go."

John struggled a little, as you have seen a fly with all his feet tangled in a spider's web.

"Perhaps you wish to dance again?"

"Yes," said Martha, demurely, "I'm so very, very fond of dancing."

"Very well!"

Here Downs made a great struggle, tore his hand from her clasp, and smitten with instantaneous repentance, gave it back again.

"Yes," she said, taking the truant hand, as if she did not know what to do with it, "I'm very fond of dancing; if one could only get a partner worth while; you never dance, I suppose?"

"Who told you so, Martha? Yes, I do."

"Yes, French fours, the Virginia reel, and all that," cried the little vixen, with a lift of her white shoulders, "skim milk!"

"I rather think I could go a notch higher than that," said Downs, proudly.

"Ha! what, you?" cried Martha, brightening, but instantly her countenance fell.

"Quadrilles, perhaps."

Downs nodded.

"But they are so stiff after——"

"After waltzing?"

"Yes, after waltzing!"

"But I know the step. I—I've been to dancing-school, and used to waltz with, with——"

"A pretty girl, I dare say—some lady that I've never heard of," cried Martha, pouting.

"No, never—I waltzed with the other boys—only with boys, I promise you."

"And you wouldn't like it," said Martha, glancing

down to her waist; "you prefer great awkward boys, I dare say."

Downs blushed to the temples, as his eyes followed her suggestive glance.

"Will you?" he said, trembling all over, and stealing one arm round her waist.

Martha's eyes flashed under the long lashes like diamonds.

"There, put out your foot this way; that's right now."

Away the pair whirled through the boudoir, and into the library, which was almost empty, but they had scarcely gone a round when the music changed. Martha kept close to her partner. "There, break step this way; try again; how awkward you are! Now, now, that's splendid; through this door into the drawing-room; one has more confidence in a crowd. Now for it."

"Dear—what's that?" cried Gillian, as a couple came sweeping by the place where she was standing with a velocity that stirred the air, and sent her vail flashing around her like a cloud. "What on earth does that mean?"

"Oh," said Woodworth, laughing, "it's only Miss Hart with another captive in full training; see, isn't the little rogue brilliantly happy?"

That moment Martha, who had stopped for breath, gave Gillian a pretty, triumphant nod, while she dropped a hand on her partner's shoulder.

"Captive!" said Gillian, laughing brightly, as the pair rushed by again; "he seems resigned, at any rate. Oh, there comes young Hurst; I thought he had gone; it is full half an hour since I saw him go up-stairs; I hope there will be no trouble about Cousin Martha. See how disturbed he looks."

"Yes," said Woodworth, "but it is not on her account. There, he has just caught sight of her among the dancers; upon my word, he is smiling; the whole thing amuses him evidently. So, my queen, you need have no apprehension from that quarter, Hurst loves himself too much for unnecessary quarrels. Look, he is going to speak with them; how pale the fellow is, though."

"With jealous rage, perhaps," said Gillian, struck with the strange look of Hurst's face.

"Nothing of the kind, fair lady! I fancy that feeling would be aroused in this direction; I'm not quite blind if you are silent! That young man cares no more for Miss Hart than you do about the rose-leaves dropping from your bouquet; watch how quietly he addresses them!"

Hurst had in reality sauntered up to the dancers as they stood still for a moment.

"Oh, Miss Martha! you must be spending a heavenly evening; it quite wakes one up to see you dance: what power you ladies have! Now, I dare say this young gentleman, to whom I haven't been introduced, by-the-way, has forgotten all about the bloom from ripe peaches, the purple dew from plums, and the tread of coarse feet in newly-fallen snow, ha!"

Hurst had mistaken his man. Downs was not to be quietly brow-beaten after that fashion, though the crimson did flash over his face.

"It makes a difference," he said, looking at Martha; "my hand is not that of a stranger. Come, Miss Hart, shall we join in the march?"

"It is for the supper-room. Where is Gillian? Where can Uncle Bentley have hid himself this long time?"

Gillian was asking the same question. Where was her father? Where had Mrs. Ransom and Aunt Hetty Hart

gone? No one could tell; but Dinah volunteered to make inquiries while her young mistress represented the family in the supper-room. Directly she came back with word that Mr. Bentley was asleep in his little study—sound asleep, she was sure, for his arms were folded on the table, and his face buried in them; besides, he neither spoke nor moved when she asked him to come down—a piece of impoliteness which Dinah knew to be impossible had he been awake.

"Poor, dear papa!" sighed Gillian, "this confusion has been too much for him; let him rest: we must find some excuse for his absence." Thus, with a little tender regret, Gillian entered the supper-room, leaning on the arm of her betrothed.

There is something really beautiful in an artistically-arranged table, which admits of an endless variety of form and tints; the glitter of crystal, the frosted gleam of plate, the glow of purple, amber, and ruby-hued fruits, snow-white pyramids of cake, pagodas of golden-hued candy, and a thousand luscious trifles imbedded in flowers and sharing their perfume, take all the combinations of a vast picture gorgeously lighted up.

In this house the supper-room, in all its prodigal magnificence, was duplicated by tall mirrors, each fitting the arch of a diminutive colonnade, separated from the room itself by a line of light Corinthian pillars, around which blossoming vines from the green-house had been trained for the occasion. These vines, multiplied by the mirrors behind, and emitting a delicate perfume, formed a succession of living garlands that trembled in the clear, soft light, while a bay window at the upper end of the room was a perfect bower of tropical leaves and blossoms.

Into this room the company flowed from the drawing-

room and vestibule. Behind the graceful shelter of the pillars the ladies retreated, gathering into close groups, which the tall mirrors answered back, till the gay multitude seemed twice its real size, and the scene resembled the gathering of a court in some royal palace, more closely than any thing ever attempted on this side the Atlantic.

For a little time the picture was sumptuously grand: even the waiters hesitated to break up the gorgeous richness of the tables; but appetite in a crowd will always drive taste to the wall. The first bunch of hot-house grapes lifted from its silver dish was the signal for a score of descending hands; towers of ice-cream began to tremble; jellies that lay like masses of amber in beds of cut crystal, were cleft in a dozen pieces, and sent off to all parts of the room; fruits that science alone could have forced into ripeness at the same time, loaded the plates of delicate Sevres china, which passed from the tables back to the fair hands beyond. But there is no pleasure in describing the scene now—the flash of crystal goblets, the explosions of champagne, the broken pyramids and ruined towers. Every thing was broken up, fruit blossoms and ices fell into interminable confusion; that which intellect and taste had been weeks in creating, appetite seized upon, rent in pieces and swept away in a single hour.

In the midst of the scene, while the scent of flowers was overborne by the breath of a crowd of revellers, and the flash of champagne broke the hum and laughter around, Gillian was startled by a whisper close to her ear.

"The moment these people depart, go to your father; he is in the little study!"

Gillian turned quickly, but no one whom she knew intimately enough for a confidential whisper like that stood

near. Still the whisper troubled her. She must run away for a moment; no one would miss her in that confusion: perhaps her father was ill.

Gillian had not entered her father's private study half a dozen times in her whole life. It was considered sacred to her father, who was always remarked to retire into its seclusion whenever those deep fits of sadness came upon him to which he had been subject ever since her remembrance. A feeling of tender sorrow always came upon her when she thought of her father in that place, and she approached it with a sinking heart.

A light knock at the door brought no answer. She turned the latch softly and looked in. Her father sat by the table with an old letter in his hand, which he was pondering over in deep thought.

"Papa!"

Bentley started, and looked round.

"Gillian!" His voice was troubled.

"Papa! come down, if you are not quite tired out; the company will soon be going away."

"Not yet, my child; it is not time!"

"Indeed, father, it is very late. I have taken leave of some already; and it is very awkward, you know, to be so entirely by myself: even Mrs. Ransom, whom I depended on, forsakes me. I haven't seen her these two hours. Do come, papa, and show yourself, if it is only for ten minutes."

"Hush! Gillian. Ask nothing of me yet. I must have one other interview with this young man. If this proves true, why then, Gillian—then—but I am talking vaguely," Bentley continued, lifting a hand to his forehead, "do not mind me, child, but go down."

"And you will not come, dear father?"

"Not to-night; I am very busy. Don't you see how busy I am?"

Gillian went into the room, and leaned over her father. She had never seen that expression in his face before. It took her by surprise. A fountain unlocked from ice could not have sent forth water more brightly. Long hidden feelings had gushed up and illuminated his features.

"Why, father, what is this?" she said, kissing his forehead; "you look strangely."

"I feel strange, very strangely."

"But it is not trouble—surely it is not trouble?"

"It is almost happiness, Gillian!"

"Then I will leave you a little while. If you had been ill I could not do it, company or not."

"Yes, go; it is very pleasant here."

"But kiss me, dear father, before I go," she said, tenderly.

Bentley put her away, very gently, but with firmness.

"No, Gillian; another's kiss was on my lips a little while ago. It was only a dream, but let it rest there to-night."

"Another's?" cried the startled girl; "a kiss dearer than mine? Oh, papa!"

"It was your mother's, Gillian, given in my dreams. Now leave me, and good-night."

Gillian went away perplexed, and conscious that her father did not seem like the same man.

An hour after, and those vast rooms were empty—a dark, confused ruin of the beauty that had been. Gillian retired to her room, and slept, but there were watchful eyes in that mansion all night.

And what had become of Mrs. Ransom? One or two

persons remembered seeing her, about the supper hour, leaving by one of the doors near which Gillian was standing; then a servant in the hall remembered that she had hurried past him, not far from the same time, without cloak or hood, and entered her carriage, which had remained near the entrance, in great haste.

The man was correct. Julia Ransom sprang into her carriage, and fell upon the back seat, pressing both hands upon her heart. The coachman held the door, waiting for orders.

"Home—home; drive fast, home!" she gasped, and, falling back to the seat, muttered, "Oh, if I could but die at will!"

The horses dashed off, and she sat moaning within. "Years, time, philosophy, religion, are they nothing? Can a moment sweep them off like straws? Am I so weak? God help me! God help me!"

The carriage stopped. She sprang out, entered her house, and awoke Ruby from a sound sleep.

"Ruby, my friend! Ruby, I say! get up and help me pack. I am going away. Be quick, Ruby!"

The mulatto sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes.

"What is it, Missus?"

"We are going away, Ruby, to Europe. A steamer sails in the morning—we must reach it by daylight. Do you understand me, Ruby?"

"Yes, Missus, we am going to sea right off. I'm ready. I'll pack up every thing in less than no time. Go, lay down, Missus, for you look tired out."

"No, no! I will help. For my life I could not rest. That is a good girl—now let's begin."

That woman seemed to have the strength of a giant that night. She flung off her ball costume, and worked

hand in hand with Ruby; only pausing now and then to say, "Make haste, girl, make haste!"

At daylight, that morning, she stood on the deck of an ocean steamer, outward bound.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE.

The Bentley ball would have supplied gossip and comment for the fashionable world at least three days, but for the more interesting romance that followed and sprung out of it. What was the good of discussing dresses and flirtations when a real domestic drama gave a zest to all these things which approached to scandal? Miss Gillian Bentley was engaged to Woodworth, that was undoubted—Woodworth, the rising man, the statesman just entering upon his career. But how would it turn out now? There were doubts abroad that Bentley was no longer a millionaire, that the queenly Gillian, with all her sumptuous pride, might yet be compelled to get her living with the needle, or by giving music-lessons. What would Woodworth think of this? Such men usually held their fame and prospects at a high value; they were things which, well managed, usually won gold in plenty. Ambitious papas, who had daughters to dispose of in a country lacking all hereditary aristocracy, were willing to unite their golden fortunes with mind, and so mount in the social scale.

Had Woodworth brought his intellect and his fame to a market like this? If so, what would be the result of a contest about Bentley's property? Would the scarcely-declared engagement be broken off? Would Gillian release her lover? Would the property, in fact, be swept into the hands of that handsome young clerk? What a catch he would be!

These were the questions that convulsed society for days after Gillian's first ball. The splendor and eclat of that occasion was swallowed up by eager curiosity and wild conjecture. Young ladies, who had repulsed the handsome clerk, now ruminated on the best way of retracing their unfortunate arrogance. In short, society was all in a ferment of conjecture. How it got abroad no one could tell; but the Bentley romance and the Bentley ball drove every other topic out of society, before the parties in the great question were themselves fully informed of the position in which they were placed.

Would the young statesman ask for his freedom? Look at him as he stands before Bentley, who sits so brave and strong in his library, telling the young pair of the fate that threatened them. Does that white forehead, those brightened eyes, look like those of a heart-traitor? You can see his broad chest heave with a noble purpose—his mouth curve into a pleasant smile. What does he care for the loss of wealth which he never realized or brought into question when that true heart sought its mate? Was Gillian less beautiful, less worthy, less loveable, because millions of dollars might pass from her father's possession? Was she a creature made up of silks, velvet and Brussels paint, or a woman, young, earnest, wealthy, in her own nature?

Woodworth never asked these questions The idea of

any thing separating him from Gillian, which did not spring out of her own soul or his, had not once presented itself.

And Gillian—of course some of my readers fancy that she must now set her lover free, make a fine speech, and proudly stand aloof while her heart breaks under its shield of magnanimous pride. No, no; Gillian was obtuse like her lover. She could not force that pure, good heart into a calculation like that. She could not so insult her lover.

They stood together there—two matchless specimens of the Almighty's own nobility—heart and mind, both were brave and loyal. Somehow their hands crept into a mutual clasp, and, looking into each other's eyes, they smiled, as if some great good had befallen them.

Bentley looked upon them in surprise. He, too, seemed unusually brave; his features were unlocked, his eyes full of animation. Had the weight of gold taken from his shoulders left the heart more buoyant? It seemed so.

"And this news does not depress you, my children?"

"Depress us, father!" cried Gillian. "Why should it? He is strong, and I am to be his wife. He loves me, not your property; and I—this news inspires me. I feel as if life were just beginning for us all."

Woodworth drew her close to his side, his face was all a-glow with tender admiration.

"You see, Mr. Bentley, I circle all that is grand, all that is immortal of your wealth with my arm. In a country like this we need not fear to look any future in the face. Your news must take another form before it even scatters the roses from Gillian's face. As for me, having made my plans without reference to your prop-

erty, I shall pursue them exactly as if nothing had happened."

"This is well," said Bentley, drawing a deep breath. "Now the worst is over. Gillian has been so tenderly, so luxuriously cared for, I feared——"

"Feared that I could not live out of this perfumed atmosphere? Oh, try me, father!" cried the young girl, eagerly. "You see I do not care. To be his mate I should know how to live usefully. Oh, how I long to begin!"

She laid her hand on Woodworth's shoulder, and rested her warm cheek upon it, while her father looked on, smiling.

"You see how far this goes toward breaking our hearts," said Woodworth, lifting a hand to her other cheek, and pressing the beautiful head to his bosom. "So long as you, our father, do not grieve, we are happy."

"Yes, very, very happy," murmured Gillian.

Mr. Bentley arose, took Gillian in his arm, and kissed her tenderly.

"Now go, my child. This young man will be here directly, and I must see him alone. Your fortitude has made me strong. She is a brave girl, Woodworth."

"She is mine!" cried the happy man, exultingly, "mine forever and ever."

They went out, and in less than half an hour after young Hurst entered the library. He seemed astonished to see Mr. Bentley walking up and down the room with a glow upon his pale face, which made it look almost youthful.

"Be seated," said Bentley, taking a chair himself. "You made a strange claim on me last night, sir. I was

tired, and taken unawares. We will now discuss the matter quietly."

"It is what I wish, sir. The chain of evidence is complete, so my lawyer tells me."

"If your evidence is complete, there was no need of a lawyer."

"Why—why, surely you will not yield this vast property without a contest?"

"Without a murmur, if you can prove that Mehitable Hart was my cousin's wife, and you her legal son," answered Bentley, with a calm smile.

Hurst stood gazing upon the upright man with his lips apart. This was a phase of human nature which he could not understand.

"But this is quite necessary," he said, at last. "I have no wish to drive you from your possessions, far from it. There is a way by which every thing can be arranged. Oh, teach your daughter to look upon me with a little kindness, and all may be well."

"My daughter, sir!"

"Yes, the beautiful Gillian. The clergyman who makes her my wife is all the judge we require; never was a question of such moment so easily settled."

"And you wish to—to marry my daughter?"

"Yes, sir, you see all the advantages at a glance: even the name will seem an arranged thing: nothing more easy. The husband takes the lady's name frequently when it chances to have advantages superior to his own. I—I am ready to make even that sacrifice."

"But my daughter is engaged!"

Hurst smiled.

"But what will that engagement amount to after this is made known? Your man of genius, sir, is the most

rabid of gold hunters; tell your daughter's betrothed that she is penniless, and you will soon make her a free woman."

"But I have told him of the chances that she is penniless."

"And the result?"

"He asks for an earlier day, that is all."

Hurst pressed his lips hard.

"And the lady?" he said, at last.

"And the lady seems disposed to oblige him."

"But you, sir?"

"I, Mr. Hurst, am not a man to bring a child like Gillian into a bargain like this; have the goodness to drop her name at once, and think of her only as the bride of a good man."

Hurst turned white.

"Then you reject all compromise?"

"I reject any thing which involves my daughter. She is mated, and I approve of her choice entirely."

"Then it is war between us."

"Where two parties resolve to be just, war seldom arises."

"Sir, I love your daughter!"

"Not another word of her! But to the proofs: I wish to look over the papers you brought me last night—I wish to see and question Miss Hetty Hart."

"Mrs. William Bentley—that is my mother's name."

"God grant that it may prove so," cried Bentley, lifting a hand to his forehead. "Sir, you cannot understand—you never will understand."

The hand sunk over his eyes, and Hurst could see the features begin to quiver—he misunderstood the sources of this emotion

"Oh, sir! if you would but reconsider—if your daughter does not partake of this wealth it is nothing to me."

Bentley lifted his head.

"No more of her!" he said, sternly. "Let me look at the certificate and the letters."

Hurst took a slip of yellow paper from his pocket-book and laid it on the table; his face took an ashen tinge, and his eyes gleamed like those of a rattlesnake while Bentley examined the document; you could see his fingers quiver as if with eagerness to snatch the paper away. Was he afraid that Bentley would tear it up, and thus destroy the evidence that threatened to render him a poor man? Or was there a deeper meaning for that tremor and the gray paleness that crept over his face?

Bentley's hand was steady, and he scrutinized the paper earnestly, but with the look of a man searching for evidence which he wishes, rather than dreads to find.

"The ink has not changed quite as much as the paper," he said, thoughtfully.

Hurst's face grew livid. Bentley saw nothing of him, but muttered to himself—

"One of these persons is dead, you say; but who is the other witness and the clergyman—this Richard Frost? Is he alive?"

"He—he died years ago," said Hurst, huskily; "as to the other witness, she is or was a very old woman."

"And living? Is this old woman to be spoken with?"

"I cannot tell: every search shall be made; but her signature is easily proved," answered Hurst, eagerly.

Bentley laid the certificate on the table before him.

"Take it," he said, gently; "it is a precious paper; God forever bless the man who left it."

"Sir!"

Bentley smiled at his astonishment.

"Ah! you cannot understand; but I would know more—of course I must know all. How came this certificate in your possession now and not before?"

"Mr. Frost was my guardian, selected by my mother and your wife. Of course the papers connected with my rights were left with him."

"But you did not know the minister: he died while you were a child."

"His wife is living."

"And did she give you the paper?"

Hurst had been growing more and more pallid; these were questions he had not anticipated. At first he was about to answer that it was old Mrs. Frost who had given him the papers; but remembering how clear and sharp the old woman's memory was, he changed the words on his lips.

"No, he left them with another person."

"Who?"

Bentley was looking at him as he put the question. It would not answer to falter under that searching look.

"Mrs. Nicholson."

"Mrs. Mary Nicholson?"

"Yes."

"Why that is the name I just read here—the other witness!"

Hurst stood mute; a shiver ran through him; he had entangled himself in the first steps of his case.

"Yes, it is the same," he said, at last, but with a great effort.

"Then she is alive; I must see her."

"She was alive; of course she will be hunted out in

time. It is some months—almost a year since I came in possession of the papers."

"And you have kept them all this time? Why?"

Hurst smiled sadly.

"Can you ask the question? You were of my father's blood; Gillian was nearer yet, and I loved her. How could I find the heart to claim what she considered as her birthright?"

Bentley was touched; this magnanimity appealed to his fine nature. He began to pity the young man, who, after all, had been greatly sinned against somewhere.

"But you make the claim now?"

"Not till I hear her name coupled openly with another—not till she has met my advances with cutting scorn: I should have been more than human to abstain after that. Now, even now, there is no influence that can force me into open hostilities so long as there is a hope of gaining her. But I will not lose every thing; I will not enrich that man with my own birthright: that would be madness, not generosity."

"You are right, young man. If this document is genuine there is no middle course. The estates I inherited from William Bentley are yours; I shall not withhold them."

"I knew this would be your magnanimous course, and so shrunk from the step I have taken."

Bentley bowed, and answered, rather hurriedly,

"But I must see these people face to face. Your mother—I thank God she is your mother—this Mrs. Nicholson, and any person capable of proving the marriage. It is just, it is important from deeper, far deeper reasons than this property. I tell you, young man, there shall be no doubt left. I will search for the truth in that

old minister's grave rather than not find it, now that there is a doubt."

Hurst was disturbed. He had expected a fierce contest. Now it seemed as if the man he sought to despoil was more eager to get proofs of his claim than he himself had ever been. The whole thing perplexed him greatly. There was a moment's silence: then Mr. Bentley spoke.

"Those letters, you will leave them with me for a few hours; not the certificate—I do not ask for that—but the letters. I wish to read them now when I am alone."

"They are my proof!"

"I know it, but you will trust me."

Hurst could not help it; precious as the letters were, he laid them on the table. The integrity of that man could not be doubted.

"Thank you," said Bentley, laying his slender hand on the package, and lifting his face with a sad, grateful smile. "Come to me in the morning, and we will search this matter more thoroughly."

Hurst went out, bowing low, and with some pure human feelings clamoring at his heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE UNCERTAIN WITNESS.

"MARY NICHOLSON!"

"Well, Mrs. Frost?"

"Mary Nicholson, where have you flirted off too, I

should like to know? Oh, Michael, you can't tell what a trial that flighty creature is. If ever I take another young person to bring up and be responsible for during my whole life, you set me down as a born idiot, nothing less. Mary Nicholson, I say, what are you doing?"

"Only putting—oh, dear, only—why nothing at all, Mrs. Frost," cried Mrs. Nicholson, appearing in the door of her bed-room wlth her foxy little front all awry on her forehead, and a cap half on, the faded pink ribbons of which she was tying.

"There it is," said Mrs. Frost, with an indulgent smile, "always the pink ribbons when a gentleman knocks. Now I tell you, Michael, this giddy creature is setting her cap for you—her cap pink with bows and streamers. Did you ever see any thing so giddy? Well, Mary Nicholson, for once Mr. Hurst really wants to see you. Sit down, and do, for mercy's sake, stop fidgeting with them cap strings—it's enough to make one sick."

"Don't be too severe on the lady," said Michael, blandly; "for my part, I think the pink ribbons charming: they give a delicate flush to the complexion."

"Mr. Hurst!" exclaimed Mrs. Frost, austerely.

"Oh, Mr. Hurst!" murmured Mrs. Nicholson, gratefully.

Michael smiled deprecatingly on Mrs. Frost, and ardently on Mrs. Nicholson.

"Then you really cannot remember any thing about this ceremony, Mrs. Frost?" he said, anxiously. "Still it must have taken place in your house, and Mrs. Nicholson was undoubtedly present, for her name is on the certificate."

"I—I—did you mean me?" gasped Mrs. Nicholson. "Of course I had a certificate; who doubts it?—who

dares attempt to take away my character? Mrs. Frost, you may call me young and giddy, and a flirt, but don't insinuate to Mr. Hurst that I never had a certificate, because I had."

"You don't understand," said Hurst, soothingly, "it is not of your marriage certificate we speak; but of one to which you were a witness, years ago, when you first came to visit Mrs. Frost. Try and think: it seems almost hopeless to ask one so blooming to remember back more than twenty years; but every thing depends on it, Mrs. Nicholson—every thing that I can have or hope for on earth. If you can only remember the circumstances under which you wrote this name, it will put a million of dollars in my pocket."

"A million of dollars! Oh, Mr. Hurst!"

"A million of dollars! Besides giving you and Mrs. Frost a house of your own, with an income that will make you the envy of half New York. A thousand doliars a year—two, three thousand, if you want it!"

Mrs. Frost's eyes began to glitter, and her head went off again, nod—nod—nod, till Hurst really longed to take hold of her and set it straight. But Mrs. Nicholson looked rather bewildered and very blank: she did not seem to relish the idea of living forever with Mrs. Frost, even in a grand house, and with an abundant income. But she sat looking at the marriage certificate, wondering vaguely how her name got on the paper, and feeling a little frightened, as if she suspected some ghost work.

"Surely you can remember?" whispered Hurst, pale with expectation.

Mrs. Nicholson shook her head. The elder woman's eyes glowed brighter and brighter, like fire through frosted glass; he was enraged at Mary Nicholson's hesitation.

"Can't you remember, Mary Nicholson?"

"I am trying my best," answered the old lady, "my very best. William Bentley, and Mehitable Hart, Mary Nicholson. Well, it's strange!"

"What is strange?" cried Mrs. Frost.

"Why, that this should be my writing, and I not remember it."

"Think—think, it is so many years ago, Mrs. Nicholson," cried Hurst, breathless with anxiety.

"Does *she* remember it?" inquired the bewildered woman, looking at Mrs. Frost, who tried to shake her head, but only introduced a few more energetic spasms in the wrong direction.

"No, I don't remember; how should I? My name isn't on the paper," cried Mrs. Frost, sharply. "My husband was a strange man in some things, and kept his own secrets close as a vice. He was always marrying people behind my back; I believe if he could a-done it, he'd have married me without letting me know it, and claimed me afterward: that was Mr. Frost all over."

"But you remember Mr. William Bentley coming here, one night, with one of the Hart girls and going into his study?" said Hurst.

"I remember them coming; and yes, yes, I dare say they did go into the study. Mary Nicholson, you were here that night: I remember your saying something about Mehitable Hart. What was it now?"

"I can't recollect, Mrs. Frost."

"But you must recollect, Mary Nicholson."

"Dear me, how can I?"

Hurst began to despair. His witness only became more and more confused.

"Mrs. Frost, if you would be so kind, just step into the

next room, and leave me alone with Mrs. Nicholson a few minutes."

"Alone with Mrs. Nicholson!"

"You understand, she has not exactly your clear memory; age tells on her a little."

"Age! Mr. Hurst, age!" wailed Mrs. Nicholson, "why, why, indeed, I don't think you can honestly call it that. My memory, sir, is clear as a bell—clear as spring-water, Mr. Hurst. Indeed, it's very cruel to take me by surprise, and, because I can't think all at once, call it age."

Hurst smiled gently, and looked at Mrs. Frost, who had arisen, and stood nodding her head at them over one shoulder.

"No, Mr. Hurst, it ain't proper, and I won't," cried the old lady, subsiding into her chair, and beginning to rock with spasmodic jerks.

"Perhaps you are right," said Hurst. "Mrs. Nicholson is a little nervous, though; allow us to sit by the window. Her memory will come back. It's only because the whole thing seemed so unimportant at the time. But you will understand, Mrs. Nicholson," he continued, leading the old lady to a chair by the window, and pressing her hand softly as he went, "you will understand that it was the marriage of my father and mother you witnessed that night. If I can prove that marriage—and you are the only witness living—it makes me the richest man in New York. It gives me the power to help my friends to any extent; and who among all those friends will have the claim on me that you will possess—you to whom I shall owe all my wealth and good fortune?"

"But you will not make me live with her?" said the poor woman, in a whisper, and casting frightened looks at the rocking-chair.

"With her! No, no. You have seen Mr. Bentley's house? been in it, I dare say?"

"Yes, once; Miss Hetty asked me, and I went. What a grand house it is!"

"When I am its master—and that your evidence will make me—what think you of being housekeeper there, mistress of every one?"

"Me? Oh, Mr. Hurst! you take away my breath. But her—what will she do?"

"She shall have a house by herself, with a good, strong person to wait on her."

"Strong! Yes, she will need to be that."

"I know—I know, but you shall be that person no longer—you who are a friend of my mother's!"

"Your mother—your mother, who was she?"

"Miss Hetty Hart, the woman whom you saw married in Mr. Frost's study, more than twenty years ago, when your name was put to this certificate."

"Yes, yes, that is my name and my writing; but as for the ceremony, somehow my mind is a little confused yet."

"Very natural. It was a long time ago, but I remember it all."

"You!"

"Yes, distinctly; you have told me the story a hundred times, when I was a little boy: how Mr. William Bentley—a handsome fellow, wasn't he?—came to Mr. Frost's house, one evening, with Miss Hart and another young person—her name is on the certificate, you see—all dressed in white, but without any thing else particular about them."

"Yes, yes, I think I do remember about the dresses—

muslin, with tucks and worked edging. I had a dress like that once," cried the old lady, eagerly.

"Oh, yes, I knew the whole thing would come to your recollection; such scenes sometimes sleep in the mind for years, and then come out clear when some object brings them forcibly to the thought. Now it is a long time since you told me about this wedding, but I remember it all—you give a story so vividly, my dear Mrs. Nicholson."

"Do I? Well, I didn't know that; but of course I shouldn't have told it if it hadn't been so."

"That was what I was saying to Mrs. Frost, when she hinted that you were a little in years and might have forgotten. 'No, my dear Mrs. Frost,' said I, 'there exist people who never grow old, and of such is Mrs. Mary Nicholson—her memory may sleep, nothing more.' Mrs. Frost will see that I am right. How quickly your mind seizes on facts! You even remember the dress."

"Oh, yes, I am almost—quite sure of the dress!"

"And the way in which they entered the study. There was a little confusion, you remember, owing to the minister not being prepared."

"Yes, yes, how kind you are! I never should have recalled all these things but for you. Now they stand out quite clear. I never saw any thing like it; and these people were really your father and mother?"

"They were, indeed. But till this time I have been kept an orphan—worse than an orphan. But for this certificate I should now be ashamed to speak of a father or mother."

"Poor fellow! I understand. But the certificate——"

"Makes a man of me—an honorable, rich, powerful man."

"Oh, I'm so glad! But how did you find the paper?"

This question was put in a raised voice, and old Mrs. Frost caught it.

"Yes, how on earth came you to find the paper, Michael? I want to know that!"

"I found it, with a bundle of letters which my aunt and mother wrote to Mr. Frost, in the old chest of drawers, in my room up-stairs."

"The old chest of drawers—my husband's chest—why, Michael, how did you get in there? It hasn't been unlocked these fifteen years."

"True, Mrs. Frost; but in that time locks rust out. I had but to give a stout pull, and found my fortune in the old papers."

"Then Mary Nicholson didn't give you my keys? It wasn't her?" cried the old woman, going up to the china vase, and nodding vehemently over it, as she thrust her old, withered hands into the rubbish it contained. "I can't find them. Mary Nicholson! Mary Nicholson!"

"Let me search!" cried Hurst, drawing a clenched hand from his pocket, as he started up. "The jar is deep. Yes, yes, something jingles—this must be your keys, grandmother!"

"Yes, so it is. Well, well, it's all right; but Mary Nicholson might have done it, you know."

"Don't say a word against her, grandmother; her memory is bright as a school girl's. I never saw any thing like it. Now if Mr. Bentley, or his lawyers, were to question you, my dear Mrs. Nicholson, you could describe the whole wedding, I dare say—how the minister looked, and all."

"Why, of course! Didn't I remember about the tucked dress?" cried the old lady, exultingly.

"But you won't let those lawyers browbeat you out of

it? they always fancy an elderly woman must forget, and so presume upon it."

"Elderly! Well, well, let them question me; I shall stick to the truth. How could I have told you all about it, if I hadn't been there?"

"But you had, perhaps, better not mention me; they would fancy you could not trust your own memory."

"They'll see, they'll see," responded the old lady, lifting her head, and giving it a gentle toss that set the faded ribbons fluttering around her face. "If I didn't witness that marriage, who did, I'd like to know?"

"Your memory has made me worth a million. Grandmother here could not quite make it out; but she is so much older."

"Wasn't there—sure of it," said the old lady, who was becoming slightly irritated by all this flattery of Mary Nicholson.

"I dare say, dear grandmother; besides, your signature is not here to prove it; but you can do me a great kindness, a very great one."

"Well, what is it? Something Mary Nicholson can't do, or you never would have thought of asking me."

"It is about my mother."

"What, Hetty Hart? Poor thing! what about her?"

"Mrs. Bentley—Bentley is her name, and mine. She is a widow, remember, with a dower claim on one-third of the Bentley property; but at this moment without a home."

"Why, isn't she at Mr. Bentley's?"

"No, I brought her away quietly, this morning. She is not well, and I did not like to leave her among our enemies."

"Poor, nervous creature!" muttered Mrs. Frost. "Well, where is she? and what do you want?"

"She is up-stairs in my room—I took the liberty. She will not prove troublesome. She only wants to be alone. If Mrs. Nicholson will take her a bit of toast and a cup of tea, now and then, I shall not forget it. You are not angry, dear grandmother?"

Here Michael would have kissed the old woman, but that the vibrations of her head rendered the salute impossible.

"There, there, remember Mary Nicholson is by, and don't be foolish—of course I ain't angry. Mary Nicholson, go round to the corner and get a mince-pie, and send a piece up with the toast; then cut the rest into three parts. Michael has found out who he is, and what belongs to him, so we'll have a celebration for once. Get a pound of crackers and four ounces of smoked beef, and—and—that'll do, Mary Nicholson!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

AUNT HETTY'S EVIDENCE.

A FEW days after the ball, Mr. Bentley presented himself at the residence of Mrs. Frost, anxious to search the evidence of Hurst's claim to the bottom. The old lady had but little information to give. She only knew that the Hart girls had been frequent visitors to Mrs. Frost a year or two before his death. That once Mr. William Bentley came with one of them—it might be both—and

she believed, but was not certain, the time was so distant, spent a portion of the time in his study. The girls seemed very happy then; but afterward, when they came and asked for private interviews with her husband, a great change was upon them: they both seemed sad and harassed. Her husband, too, was anxious and irritable after these visits, as if some secret lay at the bottom of it all. Mrs. Frost was very frank, and willing to talk, but this proved to be all that she had to say.

Mary Nicholson was less composed, but more communicative. Her memory had settled itself since Mr. Hurst's first visit. She had no doubt regarding the white dresses with tucks; no doubt that the whole party went into the study, but the exact form of the marriage ceremony escaped her. Still her signature was there, and it must have been; she would soon remember it all, only not just that moment. So far, the evidence was undoubtedly in Hurst's favor; but another and more important witness remained.

Bentley left Mrs. Frost's room, and, ascending a flight of stairs, entered an attic-chamber. Aunt Hetty lay upon the bed, with her face to the wall. She started, as the door opened, and turned upon her elbow.

When she saw Bentley, her arm gave way, and she fell back upon the pillow, uttering a faint groan.

Bentley seated himself on the bed beside her, and took her quivering little hand between both his. She tried to pull it away, and even used a little feeble force; but he held it kindly, and said, in a voice full of tender gentleness:

"Hetty, my sister, talk freely with me. If I have been the means of withholding any right from you, or the young man who claims to be your son, convince me of it

I will be just to the uttermost farthing; only tell me how it all happened."

Hetty did not sob, but her slight form seemed to wither up, as the mimosa plant curls its leaves to a touch.

"Don't! don't!" she moaned.

"Tell me one thing: is this young man your son?"

She looked up. Her eyes flashed through the mist of her sorrow.

"My son—yes, he is my son!"

Bentley sunk upon his knees, covered his face with both hands, and thanked God in his heart of hearts.

She regarded him with wonder, certain that it was not sorrow which shook his frame so violently. At last he arose, and held her hand again.

"And you assure me, before God, that he is your son?"

"Before God he is my son!"

"And you were legally married to William Bentley? Say this solemnly, as you have just spoken, and, from this hour, I am a penniless man."

She shrunk back, pressing herself down upon the pillows, and wrenched her hand from his clasp.

"Not here, not now; if they force me before a court I must, but do not ask me to take oath after oath before high God in this way!"

"But why? You cannot expect me to relinquish all I possess without full proof that this—that your son has a legal right to it. Sooner or later this oath must be taken."

"No, no, he doesn't want to quarrel!" she cried, wildly. "Do, do consent to his marrying Gillian! I shall die if he dispossesses Sarah's child! Oh, if he would but give it up! Ask him—I have begged so humbly on my very knees, but he will not listen. What can I do? He is my son, and I have lived childless all my life Don't ask me

to go on suffering as I have! Let him marry Gillian—the child of my angel sister; that noble, noble sister—there is only this way: think of it. He is handsome—you cannot say that he is not handsome—and we educated him well, Sarah and I, with our savings and our hard, hard work. He is a gentleman, every inch of him. Why not let him marry Gillian?"

That wild, pleading look; those clasped hands, with the slender fingers twining convulsively around each other; the eager, open eyes imploring him, were enough to touch the heart of any man. Bentley was deeply moved; but there was something in this terrible agitation that aroused his suspicion. Why was she so willing to swear that Michael was her son, and yet become frantic at the mention of her marriage?

The first question, so readily and so truthfully answered, had set his heart at rest on a point which had haunted him all through his manhood; thus, with his pride and affections all quieted, his intellect became clear. By what right could he despoil Gillian of her inheritance, unless the legal claims of her cousin were made positive? So long as the mother shrunk from a clear statement of all the facts connected with her marriage, he must still be in doubt.

"One word, Hetty, one word more for her sake."

"*Her* sake! Whose?" cried Hetty, with a wild start.

"Sarah—your sister, and my wife. Did she know of this marriage?"

"Marriage! Sarah! no, no! She had nothing to do with it."

"And was ignorant of it entirely?"

"Yes, yes."

"And you allowed that noble creature to sacrifice her-

self forever and ever to a caprice of silence; to work for you; plan for you; sacrifice husband and child, rather than cast shame on you, while a word would have saved all!"

Bentley arose to his feet, pale and stern. His pity was all gone. He fairly loathed the poor, weak thing that lay writhing like a worm on that low bed.

She did not look up; but buried her face down, down in the pillow, uttering broken sounds, that had no meaning save that of intense pain.

"I tell you, woman," cried Bentley, in a voice so stern with indignant anguish that it rang through the room, "I tell you it was this lie, told now or acted then, which separated me from your sister: a separation which drove her into the grave, and made me a cold, useless, miserable man."

"Oh! oh! my God! my God! Sarah! Sarah! don't haunt me! Don't curse me! I can't help it! You suffered all this to save me—now, now you are dead, and nothing can help that. I must save him, safe myself!" moaned the unhappy woman.

"Once again," said Bentley, "will you swear to me here, before the Most High, that William Bentley was your lawful husband at the time of his death?"

She did not speak, but kept on writhing out broken moans.

"Speak, woman, for I will be answered!"

She lifted her white, pinched face, imploring him. "Don't ask me now! I must do it, you know, by-and-by; but once is enough. Oh, why not let Gillian marry him? *She* would have done it; she never shrunk from any thing! She would stand up before me with her grand courage, and say, 'Let the whole fall on me. Little Hetty can't bear it, but I can!'"

"Don't speak of her, woman!"

"I will! I will! She was my sister. If she could stand here now, she would find some way for me out of this. Everybody obeyed her; no one cares for me—no one, but Michael, my son."

She lifted her head erectly, like a wren ready to fly at any thing that disputed a right to its young.

"He will take care of me; he loves me dearly. It is for my sake he wishes to be rich and great. I don't care for it, only the love; but he cannot see everybody lording it over his own mother without wanting to defend her. Oh, he's proud as the best of you, if Gillian did want to turn him out of doors."

Her air of petty defiance almost brought a smile to Bentley's face. She was like a desperate little bird picking at granite.

Bentley found, as most persons will who try it, that weakness is far more difficult to deal with than strength. It has its own little cunning, its petty deceptions, and negative stubbornness—small traits which a great mind is sure to undervalue and forget to guard against. Thus it happens, so often, that those who appear to be really insignificant persons, sometimes influence events with unexpected force. Weary of her evasions—and convinced that she had, of herself, neither the courage to do right, honestly; or to act wrong, boldly—he went away, leaving her writhing in hysterics on the bed.

Scarcely had the street-door closed, when Hurst came out from a dark nook in the garret, where he had listened to all that passed, through a crevice in the wooden ceiling, and entered his mother's room.

She rose up in bed and reached forth her arms. With a weak burst of triumph,

"I did it!" she said. "He was very cross and stern, but I stuck to the fact, and said nothing more. Now will you believe I have some firmness, Michael? No—William. I won't call you Michael any more. Sarah would have it so; she was afraid to name you after your father. But now I have nothing to be frightened about. Father, my dear old father, is dead and gone; he cannot make me tremble with his eyes; and as for Daniel, why the way you have settled it, no disgrace can come on him, or me, or any one, especially if you marry Gillian."

Hurst had seated himself, and drew her into his arms while she was talking; so her speech ended in little hysterical caresses, which he returned sparingly; while, with the craft of a bad heart, and the energy of a strong one, he encouraged her—praised the firmness which she had displayed; and, with sophistry which might have blinded a more vigorous intellect, convinced her that what he sought was but the just and natural right which every son had to inherit from his father.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AMILY CONSULTATIONS.

BENTLEY sought his daughter, for she alone had a right to share his doubts and help in his decision. He found her, just after Woodworth had departed, happy, but a little serious; for she had begun to reflect upon the fate that lay before her father, should Hurst maintain his pre-

tensions to the estate. Proud, sensitive, and blessed with a refinement of taste which renders the coarse things and harsh passages of life almost unendurable, what would he do with poverty? It was a phase of life he had outrun years ago; and now, with all his habits fixed, and his tastes refined into sources of exquisite enjoyment, must he give up every thing, and become a recluse, or a dependent?

These thoughts had saddened Gillian a little amid her happiness. It seemed as if, in marrying Woodworth, she abandoned her father to loneliness, or secured for him only the humiliation of dependence. Then a thousand questions arose that she wished to ask. That conversation with her Uncle Daniel, in the old stone-house, in which her mother's history had been so entangled with that of Aunt Hetty, rose freshly to her mind. She longed to know more of all this, and felt free to question her father as she had never done before.

Bentley sat down by Gillian, and told her of his interview with the old women, and of that which followed with Aunt Hetty, who had secretly left the house on the morning after the party. Word for word he repeated the conversation, and described the scene.

Gillian listened gravely; her quick intellect seized upon the facts, and came to conclusions almost before they were uttered.

"Father," she said, "there is something wrong in this! If the marriage was ever solemnized, why was it kept secret? Why did she falter when that question came up, and yet claim her son so boldly? Besides, was my mother a woman to leave this property in your hands, and share it with you, if she had suspected this?"

Bentley started: he had never thought of this. It was

implicating the integrity of his dead wife if he yielded to this demand, blackening the fame which had just been rescued from suspicion. His brow became dark at this, and his heart grew anxious again. Gillian watched the changes of his countenance with tender anxiety.

"Papa, tell me of my mother. Did you love her?"

The blood, always so cool, flashed up like fire, reddening that pale forehead, and burning in his eyes.

"Love her, Gillian? Yes, better than my own soul."

"And you were happy together?"

"For a time, Gillian, happy beyond any thing I can describe. Your mother was a woman to make a heaven of life: she brightened every thing around her!"

"And died so early?" said Gillian, drooping her eyes, and sighing heavily. "Oh, father, tell me of her death. I never heard you speak of it!"

"First," said Bentley, and his sharp, quick breathing betrayed the suppressed agitation which only made him a little pale—"first let me tell you of her life—how I found her."

"Uncle Daniel told me of that, papa; all about your cousin being killed, and the trouble it caused; about Aunt Hetty's coming to town. I thought at first it was my mother who felt the loss most; but now——"

"Now," said Bentley, "she is proved by her unhappy sister's confession to have been a creature so noble that a husband should have gloried in her. She was endowed with every thing grand and good. She was a martyr to her family, an angel to me, and yet I destroyed her."

"Father!"

"Yes, look surprised! Let my words drain the color from your cheek. It is a truth, I destroyed her, stung her pride to the quick, wounded her delicacy, trampled on all

that was sensitive or grand in her nature. Blows would have been far more kind. Gillian, I suspected your mother!"

"Suspected my mother?"

"Yes, the world would say I had cause. It sprang out of this mystery, or this sin, which is developing itself now. Your mother was frank to a fault, generous beyond any person I ever heard of. It was not the generosity which gives alone, but a spirit of self-sacrifice, a disposition to take up the burdens of those who were weaker than herself, and carry them forward. It did not require that the person helped should be her friend or agreeable to her taste. Humanity was enough to claim a sacrifice of her. She loved to do good for the sweet reward which sprang up in her own heart. Yet she had a thousand disguises for this weakness, as she called it; and, to hear her talk, you would have fancied her a reckless, bright creature, capable of impulsive kindness, but little more. She was like you, Gillian, not so beautiful in one way, perhaps, but with a world of fresh vigor, of reckless joyousness, and with a susceptibility of sadness that you have never dreamed of."

"Oh, if I had but known her!" sighed Gillian.

"She was a woman to worship, Gillian; fresh as the flowers of an untrodden wilderness, quick to think, earnest to act. Her impetuosity sometimes troubled me a little, for I had been educated with more social restraints, and was over-sensitive to appearances; but after living so long in the dead level of conventionalisms, her very faults appear to me as virtues now."

"No wonder you loved her—no wonder!"

Bentley bowed his head; a feeling of heavy self-abase-

ment crept over him. He could not look Gillian in the face. At last he spoke with hoarse slowness.

"I am naturally suspicious!"

"You, papa?"

"Distrustful, rather. I loved my wife, God only knows how well; but from the first there was something about her acquaintance with my cousin that troubled me. Frank in all things else, she was silent if his name was mentioned; even before I married her the idea of an attachment between them had disturbed me. Her grief at his death was terrible. It seemed like despair."

"It was strange. I thought so when Uncle Daniel told me about it. Now it is clear. She was grieving for her sister, striving to shield her sister," said Gillian.

"I knew that she had a secret," continued Bentley, wrapped in his own thoughts; "that she had some object of interest in the city which was never mentioned in her home. There was a clergyman by the name of Frost whom she visited often, and with some appearance of mystery. At times she came to me for money, and no purchase followed, a thing that struck me as strange; for she had a sumptuous love of the beautiful, and a fabric or gem that gratified this passion made her happy as a child. Indeed, in many things, she was like a child, always in trifles, though, in important things, she added almost masculine strength to more womanly tenderness than I ever saw in a human heart. These little things made me distrustful. I wondered why this woman, to whose nature a secret was repulsive, had one from her own husband.

"One day, it was when you were a little thing, Gillian, a trunk was sent down from your Uncle Daniel's, which had belonged to William Bentley. In it had been placed the coat which my cousin wore the day he was killed.

Scrupulously honest in all things, Daniel had found the trunk in his garret, and so forwarded it to the city.

"Sarah was out when the trunk arrived. I opened it, took up the coat carelessly, and a pocket-book fell out of a side pocket. In that book I found a letter from my wife to William Bentley——"

"Well, father!" said Gillian, holding her breath.

"It was a passionate appeal to his honor—a wild, urgent request that he should save her and her family from disgrace. It was a letter written in distraction, eloquent beyond any thing I ever read; such as Sarah would write if driven wild by danger, or threatened with disgrace."

Gillian listened, turning pale and cold, till she remembered all that had transpired regarding her aunt. Then her breath came out in quick gushes, and she burst into a passion of tears.

"My mother, my great-hearted mother, it was for her only sister she was pleading; it was to save my grandfather's gray hairs from dishonor!"

"I read the letter, and it maddened me. But my temperament is firm; I knew how to wait. After that I traced your mother to a house in the city; I saw her with my own eyes caressing a child—a bright, handsome boy, whose very look was death to me. At night I gave your mother the letter, and told her that she had been traced in her visits to the living guilt, which would forever be an evidence against her. She was at first dumb and cold as marble. Then with a look that made my blood burn, she turned from me.

"I had some wild hope that she might explain; but she attempted nothing of the kind, though her air had more than the grandeur of innocence: all that she said was—

"'For my father's sake, give me silence! I ask nothing,

deny nothing. But my father is an old man, and the thought of disgrace would kill him.'

"'We must part,' I said, driven to madness by her acquiescence in the charge I had made.

"'I know that,' she said, with terrible sadness. 'If you could think this of me, it is enough. But in silence, let it be in silence, if not for my sake, think of our child.'

"It was settled. From that time she grew to be a stranger. We suffered the agony of each other's presence, and that was all. Either in time or eternity I shall never know agony like that.

"It was arranged that our shame should be locked up forever. We went to Europe directly, up the Mediterranean, on to Naples. There I left your mother—first separating her from her child, whom I placed in a convent. For myself, I went on to Turkey, Egypt, and the Holy Land, a weary, heavy-hearted man; God help me, for I loved the woman I had left!

"She would take no money from me; but I was not to be repulsed, and forced a sum upon her before leaving her a stranger in a strange land.

"Two years after, I came back to Naples and inquired after my wife. They told me that the fair woman from America had remained some months in the city, growing paler and paler each day till she died. You have seen the place in the *Campo Sante* where she sleeps, Gillian!"

"And now she is dead, and you know how innocent she was!" cried Gillian, weaving her hands together. "Oh, my mother—my mother!"

"It was I that killed—I, her husband! If her child hates me, it is but just."

"Father, the wrong was not yours—not hers. It was the sin of that miserable, miserable woman—she whose

son would now cast us into poverty. Never, while I live, shall this thing be. Tell him that you contest this claim—that his father's sin has done its last work with us."

"But my wife died to save this woman from disgrace. We can only contest her son's claim by proving that which she suffered martyrdom to conceal."

"True, true!" said Gillian; "and must the innocent always suffer for the guilty? Must this weak, miserable woman darken our lives forever?"

"She is your mother's sister—your grandfather's child!"

"Alas! yes!"

"Shall we, in order to save Bentley's property, heap disgrace on her family?"

"No, no, papa—better any thing than that. Poor Uncle Daniel—it would kill him."

"To be dragged through a court of law, hear her name bandied by counsel, printed in a hundred journals—what would poverty be compared to that?" said Bentley.

Gillian shuddered.

"Father," she said, "we have gone too far. This is a terrible epoch in our lives; I cannot leave you yet. Mr. Woodworth must wait till we become a little used to poverty."

"Well, my child, we will consider that; but these two people shall not shipwreck your happiness."

"Let us go to Uncle Daniel," said Gillian. "He is honest and true-hearted. Let us all go at once."

They went.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MRS. RANSOM'S RETURN.

BENTLEY took his daughter and went into Rockland county, to the old homestead, which no longer belonged to him or to Daniel Hart; but, right or wrong, was henceforth the property of Michael Hurst, or, if we must call him so, William Bentley. The mortgage, though considered a dead letter among themselves, still existed; and the farm like all the other property, was swept out of their possession when Mr. Bentley resolved to abdicate. Thus, wherever they went, the father and daughter carried misfortune with them.

It was night again in the stone farm-house. Dinah was glorifying herself in the kitchen, and began at once to institute a new system of behavior in her department. She was horrified by the two-pronged forks, and went off in spasms of eloquent distress when the farm-hands insisted upon eating with their knives. Liz was deeply impressed by all this, and watched her grandmother with open-mouthed admiration, taken completely off her feet by the gorgeous turban with which Dinah had condescended to astonish the natives.

In the sitting-room, gathered around the hickory-wood fire, were Bentley, Gillian, Daniel Hart and his daughter, in serious consultation.

"This is my opinion," said Daniel Hart: "as we have all made up our minds to give up, and let the young

fellow take possession, we have but one thing to consider —how are we to live, and where, from this time out? If the farm was ours that would be easily settled. But it is not, and we must look up new homes somewhere. How much capital have we got among us?"

Mr. Bentley shook his head.

"Very little, I fancy: we left every thing but bare personal necessaries behind," he said.

"I have a few jewels, which he could not claim," said Gillian, eagerly: "they were gifts from dear friends."

"That is something worth while. Why, a single diamond will build us a log cabin!" said Uncle Daniel, cheerfully.

"A log cabin!" exclaimed Gillian.

"Yes, that's my idea, niece. Supposing we turn your diamonds into public lands, build a new home away out in the wilderness, and begin life again fair and square?"

"In the wilderness! What could my father do there?" cried Gillian, with a half-frightened look.

"Do! why rest, hunt, read and be an independent man, to be sure. I've got a couple of thousand dollars or so, laid up. That, with your pretty gimcracks, Gillian, will buy us a tract of land worth having. Then the log houses are some of 'em pretty as pictures. That sort of life would make a woman of you, right off the reel, niece. Oh, how your mother would have liked it!"

Gillian looked at her father anxiously. He seemed interested in the idea. It had struck him for the first time.

"Oh, Gillian, you would like it, I'm sure!" said Martha. "I've heard all about it."

"You, Matty! why how?" exclaimed Daniel Hart, in surprise. "What can you know about the woods?"

"I! oh, ever so much, father! the wild strawberries—the grape vines tangled from tree to tree, all bending with purple clusters—the deer leaping twenty feet at one bound—ponds full of water-lilies, and *such* fish—*he* told me all about them."

"He! who, darter?"

"Oh, my—nobody in particular: I only heard some of the young people talking about going West for a start in life."

Matty's face was crimson. When Gillian smiled, she got back of her father's chair, and shook her clenched hand with mock ferocity, fearing that the name of John Downs would come out.

But Gillian only laughed, a little roguish laugh, and the conversation went on.

"But what can I do out there?" said Gillian.

"You, niece! why, pick wild fruit, and search in the prairies for flowers," said Daniel Hart.

"But there will be hard work for us all."

"Well, then, you must teach school."

"In a log school-house—well, I can do that; and father?"

"He must shoot our game, catch our fish, and see to the garden, while I chop trees, make stone walls, and get the crops in."

"Isn't that splendid?" said Matty.

"We'll have a double cabin—something grand, with an outhouse for Dinah and Liz," continued Hart, warming with his subject. "The girls shall take their books."

"And a guitar; I can take that, papa?" said Gillian.

"We will have fine horses," continued Hart.

"And such cows!" said Matty.

"With pretty hens and chickens and dove-cotes," said Gillian. "Papa, I'm sure we shall like it. Then perhaps—

perhaps some one else will come out and be charmed with our lodge in the wilderness, and settle down close by, and go back to Washington a Senator or something of that kind."

Mr. Bentley smiled.

"The West is sometimes a short cut to greatness," he said, "who knows?"

"Then it is all settled?" said Daniel Hart, rubbing his hard hands with honest satisfaction. "We are to go West?"

"Yes, yes," answered the other voices, and the little party that had assembled, so downcast and sad in the sitting-room, broke up, quite in a glow of hopefulness.

"Well, now, that we are all agreed, when shall we start?" said Daniel.

"The earlier the better," answered Bentley. "Let it be next week."

That night Martha Hart wrote a letter to John Downs, which she put into the post-office with her own hands, while the dew lay thick upon the meadows, exactly as her Aunt Sarah had sent off her heart-breaking missives years since.

Ten days from that family-council in the sitting-room, the homestead was empty. As his father had left old associations in New England long ago, when York State was "out-west," and helped to plant a Yankee colony in Rockland county, so Daniel Hart set forth to build a new home for his family and that of his benefactor and brother-in-law. Of all that once happy household Aunt Hetty alone remained behind, and she would as soon have made her bed in a sepulchre as cross that sacred threshold again.

Never in the history of litigation, perhaps, had a vast

property been so quietly transferred. In less than a month after his first demand, Hurst found himself in possession of that noble mansion in town, with all its costly appurtenances, and an income that one year before would have seemed to him something fabulous. He would gladly have shared this wealth with its real owners, and made more than one desperate effort to win Gillian after his advances had been peremptorily rejected. But that young lady positively refused to see him, and sent back his letters unopened, while Mr. Bentley rejected every overture for a compromise.

"No," he said, "the estate is yours, or it is mine. I accept nothing which the law does not give, and that I will not evoke. Let God judge between us."

Aunt Hetty, after her fashion, strove to make some restitution. She had not the courage to seek an interview with her family, but sent anonymous letters containing large sums of money, and when they were returned, wrote a most touching letter in her own name, beseeching her brother not to break her heart, but stay on the homestead and share some of the wealth that was killing her.

Daniel Hart answered this letter only to say that the homestead was now empty, and his family were going with him into the wilderness. He made no reproaches, and said nothing of Mr. Bentley or Gillian. In giving up their place in fashionable life both these persons wished to be forgotten. Gillian was yet very young, and after two years of solitude might return to that same life with the husband of her choice, but those two years she would devote to her father exclusively. The host of butterfly friends she had made might claim her then or not, according to their fancy. She left them almost without regret—all except Mrs. Ransom, and she had gone away without

a word of farewell or without leaving a message by which she might hereafter be found.

In his letter to Hetty Hart, Daniel had promised to communicate with her once more; and after a month or two came a letter saying that he and his daughter, with Bentley and Gillian, had settled on a tract of land far west, and were living comfortably together. They had built a double cabin, with out-houses, one of which Dinah and Liz occupied as a kitchen. Every thing was comfortable and neat as wax. Mr. Bentley was growing strong and cheerful. The girls were happy as birds, and as for himself, never in all his life had he been able to put in such a day's chopping as he could do now.

This letter comforted Hetty in the grand solitude of her new home. It soothed her conscience, and left her, to a certain extent, free to enjoy the society of her son and the wealth which she had secured to him. She gave the letter to Hurst—we cannot change the name—and he treasured it in silence, for it contained Gillian's address, and hereafter, perhaps, he might make use of it.

Now, young, handsome, wealthy, Hurst flung himself into life with a cool resolve to enjoy it to the utmost. Out of all his resources he was determined to attain the utmost possible gratification. If he squandered money, it was for this purpose only. He bought horses, gave parties, lavished vast sums on the mansion which Bentley had already made perfect. He was the rage at Saratoga, and the fashion at Newport. In fact this young Bentley, with his immense wealth and romantic antecedents, was the great catch of the season. But, with all his splendor, a cold, aching anxiety was at his heart. The foundations of his greatness were unreal. Men like him are seldom troubled with much conscience, till they reach some lonely

death-bed; and Hurst was far too prosperous for over-sensitiveness. But he felt unsafe. Once married to Gillian, and he could defy fate. But she had chosen poverty and years of solitude in the western forests, rather than endure his society. The engagement with Woodworth was certain to end in marriage—and then? What if the new husband should determine to investigate his wife's claims? Woodworth was a sharp, clear-headed lawyer, a man of the world, and understood well all the advantages of wealth.

These fears lay like serpents in the path of the rich man; but the intellect that had accomplished so much must face these dangers and overcome them. With time and resolution much could be done. Half his task was completed. Gillian must yet be his wife. He knew where to find her, and that was a great point gained.

With all his audacity, Hurst had not the courage to seek the persons he had so deeply wronged. His resolve did not fail, but he put off the time, and so more than a year went by and with it a sense of security crept over him. One thing was strange. He heard nothing from Mrs. Ransom. The Bloomingdale cottage was still closed and no letters came. He heard of her once through some European travellers, who had seen her in Greece, and afterwards learned that she had crossed the desert with a party on its way to the Holy Land. There was a mystery about this which he could not fathom; up to that time her protecting arm had always been over him: no matter how far off caprice or destiny might carry her, he was sure to feel the benefit of her regard in some form; now she was silent as the grave.

This silence could not have arisen from any knowledge of his good fortune, for she had left the country more

than a week before that was known of a certainty, even to himself. These conjectures gave him considerable uneasiness at times, for this woman was perhaps the only person on earth whom he thoroughly respected and feared. Could he have been certain that she was dead, he might not have regretted it; but, with all his courage, he shrunk from the thought of encountering her searching questions and clear judgment.

But he was deep into the second year of his possession, and no word or message ever came from her. Mrs. William Bentley, as he called his mother, had presided over his house from the beginning, but she withered in the stately solitude to which he after a while consigned her. As a single man he received but little company at home, and spent his life at hotels, clubs, and watering-places, leaving her with old Mary Nicholson for an humble companion, and a household of servants to control. Such was his method of repaying the wicked sacrifice she had made for him.

This sad state of things withered up the little gleam of hope that had dawned upon her when he first claimed her as a parent, and the poor woman was slowly and quietly dying, exactly as some poor little transplanted evergreen perishes for want of native soil. She had been growing ill for some weeks: now an obstinate cough set in, and, in her anxiety, the old housekeeper sent for the son, who was in the full glory of a Newport season. He came at once, filled with anxious solicitude, which gave the poor mother a fresh hold on life. That day she insisted upon getting up and coming down to breakfast with him, in the little morning-room that opened upon the garden. He always insisted upon her being richly dressed: so she put on a pretty cap fluttering with rose-colored

ribbons, and a robe of some rich oriental pattern, hoping to conceal her paleness. But Hurst saw how shadowy she had become at a glance, and his heart smote him. He drew an easy-chair, soft with velvet cushions, to the table, and seated her tenderly in it. The servants were all sent away, and he insisted on pouring out the coffee, for her poor little trembling hands had attempted the task in vain.

The poor mother watched him with looks of yearning fondness, and her eyes filled with tears. When her son was by she could not be very sorry for the falsehood that had gained her the great happiness of these attentions.

"There, mother," he said, stooping down to kiss her forehead, "I have put in just the right quantity of cream, and here is a delicious French roll; take a mouthful for my sake: they tell me you eat nothing!"

She took the roll and broke off a fragment, forcing herself to eat it with apparent relish.

"That is right," he said, seating himself; "we will soon have you well now."

She smiled and said: "Oh, yes, I am well; you see what an appetite I have."

Just then Mrs. Nicholson came in, looking greatly flurried.

"What is it?" said Hurst; for the serpent which lay coiled under his good fortune was always on the alert.

"A lady," said Mrs. Nicholson, "who insists on coming in; she wants to see you both!"

Hetty looked wildly around, and began to tremble among her cushions. Hurst, too, was nervous, but he gave no sign.

"Well, let her come in here," he said; "sit still, mother. If the lady wishes to see us both, this is the best place."

The door opened, and the lady came in.

"Mrs. Ransom!" cried Hurst, starting up and reaching out his hand.

The lady put his hand gently aside without clasping it. She had evidently come off a journey from foreign parts, for her dress seemed strange and old-fashioned. The soft hair floated down her cheeks in waves, and she wore a large merino shawl, with a deep palm-leaf border, such as had been in fashion when Hetty Hart was a girl.

"Is this lady your mother?" she said, rejecting the hand.

When Hetty heard the voice, she started up from her easy-chair and confronted the stranger. She saw the face, the waving hair, the shawl with its familiar pattern—one just like it lay in her bureau up-stairs. Her eyes widened, the white lips grew cold, she grasped at the table-cloth for support—dragging a cup and saucer of delicate china to the ground.

Hurst went up to his mother, supporting her with his arm.

"Mrs. Ransom, this is unexpected—it is a strange return! You refuse my hand—wherefore?"

Hetty Hart clung to the young man; her eyes distended wildly, her lips apart—she seemed turning into stone.

"Hush!" she said, in a hoarse whisper, "it is my sister Sarah!"

"Michael," said Mrs. Ransom, quietly, "give me the marriage certificate which you have forged, and the letters you have stolen."

"Madam!"

"Your mother says the truth. I am her sister Sarah—the wife of that Bentley you have defrauded—the mother of Gillian! Your crime has rendered secrecy of no farther

avail. I made a vow to save that poor soul from disgrace, and kept the vow, through what humiliation and pain you will never know. By her own act she has unsealed my lips, and I have come to claim my husband, my child and all that is theirs."

Hurst had not lost all his courage. He was white as death, and shivered like a dead cedar in the wind, but some portion of his iron nature remained firm.

"Madam, this is a flimsy imposition! You are not my mother's sister!"

"Ask her!" she answered, pointing to the wretched little woman who had sunk all in a heap among the crimson cushions. "Mehitable Hart, look up and say if I am not your sister!"

"Mother, you know this is an imposition! Don't look at her; see, I am ready to help you!"

It was in vain. Perhaps if Hurst could have fastened her eyes first, his terrible power over her might have prevailed, but the magnetism of another presence enthralled her, and those wild eyes turned on her sister, fascinated.

"Hetty, my poor Hetty! why are you terrified? Did I ever harm you?" said Mrs. Ransom, in a voice broken with tender emotion.

Hetty Hart began to shiver, and clung close to her son.

"Hetty!"

"Oh, Sarah, don't—don't look at me so! He never would have owned me, if I hadn't taken the shame off. What could I do?"

"I know, Hetty, I know how you must have loved this young man. I, too, loved him for your sake."

"Oh, he is all the world to me!"

"Poor, poor mother!—be good to her, Michael; treat her tenderly, as if she were a child. She is not one of

those who can suffer and be strong; but she is a loving creature. Deal kindly by her, and you shall never want for wealth or any thing else that I can give."

"It was for her sake—she was pining to death, my poor mother!" said Hurst, with some feeling. "I could not bear it."

"Well, well, it is over now. Trust me—can you trust me yet, sister Hetty?"

"Trust you! oh, Sarah!"

"Can you be content to live with your son?"

"With my son!—with him!"

The little woman crept close to Hurst, and clung around him, weeping softly, and thanking her sister, in broken sentences, for having saved her and her son from the deep trouble that had already nearly broken her heart.

"We will obey her. Sarah is always right—always kind, Michael. I knew if she could rise from the dead—and it seems as if she had, don't it?—all would turn out well. When shall we go, sister? I am ready."

"In a few days—in a few hours, if possible. Find out a quiet home in England or France, and some day I will come and see how you get along."

"That will be pleasant, son," said Hetty, with a fond smile; "you and I all alone in the world. Oh, how I have longed for this! and it is Sarah that does it for us—my sister, Sarah, whom we all thought dead years ago. Tell her that we will be ready, son."

"I have no choice," answered Hurst, sullenly.

"Oh, Michael!"

"Well, then, Mrs. Ransom, I am willing—I am grateful. Is that enough, mad'—mother?"

Hetty kissed his hands, and laid her little, withered cheek softly against his bosom.

Mrs. Ransom took her from his arms, kissed her upon the forehead, as she had done a thousand times in youth, and turned with tears in her eyes.

"Michael, give me that certificate and the letters. I heard all far away in the Holy Land, and came at once, resolved to right the wrong you have done without farther exposure if I could; at all events to perform my duty. Give me the papers, that I may destroy them before they work evil to you."

Hurst put one hand into his bosom and drew forth a slip of yellow paper and some letters; they rattled in his hands like dead leaves, and his face was ghastly.

"It is well," she said, tearing the paper into fragments. "Now take my sister—my poor, feeble sister, Hetty—and go away. There is a ship lying now in the stream, ready to sail for England. Here is money. I will send you more. Be kind to her, and you shall have plenty for both, I promise it."

Hurst took the money, dumbly, as if some statue had been moved by inward mechanism.

"But my husband, my child—first tell me where I can find them," said Mrs. Ransom.

Hurst shook his head in silence. Mrs. Ransom turned to her sister.

"I don't know; we had one letter," cried the little woman. "It was mailed away out-west, but I cannot remember where, and I don't in the least know what became of the letter."

Mrs. Ransom looked distressed.

"But Woodworth—the engagement is not broken off; he can tell me," she said, brightening with fresh hope.

"Woodworth is not in the city," answered Hurst. "He has gone South."

"Then what can I do?" she cried, wringing her hands in keen disappointment. "I have spent so much of life away from them; every moment I lose is a pang. Oh Hurst! if I have ever been kind or forbearing to you, help me now!"

"How can I, when you banish me from the country?"

"But you shall not go till they are found. I will stand between you and all harm. This wicked secret is ours yet."

Hurst walked across the room; his face was white as ever when he came back, but the gleam of a quick idea brightened it with keen intelligence.

"Madam, if any effort of mine to find those you love can atone for the pain I have given, tell me what to do, and I will not fail you."

"Find my husband and my child," she cried, passionately. "I will travel to the ends of the earth for them, but every lost moment is a sacrifice, and I do not know what course to take."

"Trust me; I will find them."

"You, Michael, and they your enemies!" moaned his mother.

"She demands it, and I will not shrink," answered the young man. "Be content, mother; I leave you in her care."

The poor mother drew a deep breath, and turned her eyes in wild pleading on her sister.

"It will be like old times for you and I to be together," said Mrs. Ransom, kneeling before the frail woman and drawing the pale face caressingly to her shoulder.

"Yes, yes, it will be like old times, when we made dandelion chains in the back meadow," answered the little woman, with a hysterical laugh.

"Madam, I will start at once; it may be a month or two before I send you intelligence, but it shall come!"

"Ah, Michael, that will redeem every thing. Have no fear of them: they are generous and noble!"

"I am sure of it," he answered. "Now, mother, farewell! in a few weeks we shall meet again: till then, stay here with your sister."

The little woman stood up, tottering from weakness. She clung around her son, moaning over him like a wounded dove.

"Good-by, darling! Be good, and come back free of all blame; then, as Sarah says, we will go off and live by ourselves—no club-houses—no watering-places—nothing but a nice, quiet home!"

Hurst smiled a cruel, cold smile, that bespoke some desperate idea; but his mother was raining kisses on his face, and no one saw it.

Then they parted. Hurst left the house in less than one hour after Sarah Bentley entered it, and she bade God bless him as he went. Her faith in human goodness was wonderful, and she did not once doubt that the young man would redeem his faults. So she stood at the window and saw him pass away very hopefully. Hetty had crept to her side and was watching him also; but tears swelled in her eyes, and there was a struggle for breath in her chest—a struggle that left ridges of red foam on her pale lips, which she strove to wipe away unseen.

But Sarah Bentley saw the stain on her delicate handkerchief with a thrill of apprehension.

"Why, Hetty, what is that?"

"Nothing; it's of no consequence—I'm used to it!"

"Since when, Hetty?"

"Oh, ever since that day when I told him!"

"But you will be better now. Remember what a famous nurse I was!"

"Oh, yes, I shall be better with you! But tell me, Sarah, is he quite gone? I—I cannot see very far, the air is so foggy!"

Poor soul, it was the mist of a broken heart going off in tears!

This was the idea that had started up from the first sense of ruin that fell on Michael Hurst when Sarah Bentley asked after her husband.

"I will find them," he said—Uncle Daniel's letter was in his pocket then—"I will find them, and marry the girl with her will or against it, and her father shall not stand in the way! If he hunts in the wilderness, so do I. Men are often taken for deer and shot by accident. If he opposes me, I shall be ready, at any rate. That proud girl shall come back to her mother my wife; and if Julia Ransom finds herself a widow, it will teach her to be less officious. Does she think that, after tasting the pleasures and powers of wealth for one little year, it can be easily wrested from me? Not while I have brains to think, and the courage to strike! No, I will have the girl and keep her money! They have made a desperate man of me! Now, Westward, ho! and every one for himself!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE WESTERN CLEARING.

It was a wild clearing in the heart of a Western forest. A stout, athletic man was at work in one corner, and each lusty stroke of his axe, as it was swung into the heart of

a giant chestnut, reverberated cheerfully through the woods. The morning was bright, and the air rich with the commingled perfume of mosses, flowers and foliage gathered up from the wilderness. The early sunshine danced among the boughs over our woodman's head, and every blow of his axe brought a storm of dew down to the daisies and strawberry vines which he was treading to death beneath his heavy shoes.

Though the morning was deliciously cool and breezy, the workman stopped now and then to inhale a deep breath and wipe the perspiration from his forehead, and at each time he cast a glance of good-natured anxiety over the logs rolled together in heaps, and the forest of newly-made stumps that stood glistening in the sunshine, yet full of sap and with tufts of green still clinging to their broken bark. But though his eye took in every object which lay between him and the double log-cabin that stood on the opposite verge of the clearing, it invariably lingered last and longest on the thong of newly-cut leather which, from the distance, he could just see dangling through a gimlet-hole in the door from the wooden latch which secured it within.

There was hunger and some little desire for rest in those frequent glances toward the slender cloud of smoke that went curling up from the stick-chimney of his dwelling. At last he planted his axe against the massive trunk which it had half-cut away, and was rolling down his shirt sleeves, when the latch-string began to vibrate before his eye. After a moment the cabin door opened, and a young man came out with a rifle in his hand, and dressed in a green hunting-shirt.

"Halloa!" exclaimed Daniel Hart, with a sort of half whistle, as he buttoned his wristband; "arly and late

that chap is always a-hanging round our premises. I calculate that it ain't very difficult to guess why the gal was so long a-getting breakfast."

Daniel had scarcely buttoned his second wristband when a young girl in a plain calico-dress appeared in the cabin door with a napkin in her hand, which she flung up as a signal for breakfast.

"Oh, yes, she can call me now," said Daniel, taking up his old straw-hat from the grass, "but before I eat or drink I must know what brings that John Downs into these diggins so often: when foxes begin to prowl round a hen-coop in the daytime, it looks dangerous."

"I say, John Downs, halloa, this way a minute!" and as Daniel Hart uttered this shout he swung his hat in the air—an unnecessary signal, for his voice might have been heard far into the woods.

The young hunter turned and came across the clearing, and though he swung his rifle about with a dashing air, Daniel could see that his face was crimson as he drew near; but a fine, handsome face it was, Daniel could not deny that, though he did exert himself to look ferocious, and got up a frown, as he approached, that seemed much out of place on that broad, frank forehead.

"Well, John, what brings you in these parts so soon again?" inquired Daniel Hart, putting on his old straw hat and folding his arms over his broad chest. "Don't think of settling out-west, nor any thing, do you?"

"Well," said John Downs, blushing still more deeply, "I don't know how it will be. A chap can't always make his home in the woods, you'll agree to that, I suppose?"

Daniel nodded his head, and replied,

"Just so, John."

"Well," continued John, gathering courage from his companion's assent, "I have a sort of fancy to settle down before long, and clear up a farm for myself. Game is getting scarce, and I begin to feel rather lonesome camping out at nights so much."

"And how are you a-going to pay for the land?" inquired Daniel, folding his arms more tightly over his chest; "wild lands are cheap out here, true enough; but yet government won't be satisfied with any thing less than cash on the nail."

"I know that," replied the young man with a brightening eye; "but I've got three hundred dollars let out to Judge Church, down on The Bend."

"Well, but you haven't taken a notion to my property here, have you?" inquired Daniel, with a shrewd smile. "You don't want me to sell out, nor nothing?"

"No," stammered the young hunter, crushing a tuft of wild pinks beneath the butt of his rifle to hide his embarrassment, "but I've been thinking——"

"Well, there isn't nothing very uncommon in that, is there?" said Daniel, laughing as the young man hesitated and blushed like a girl.

"No, Mr. Hart, no, I may as well out with it," cried Downs, setting down his rifle hard, and speaking with desperate rapidity; "I meant to talk with you about it in a day or two, any way: but as we are on the subject, supposing we finish it at once. There is Martha, your daughter: we have been acquainted three years come fall, in Rockland county and out here, and if you ain't willing to let her keep house for me, it don't make much odds whether I have a farm or take to the woods again. One thing is certain—I shan't be very contented anywhere."

"There, now, you've spoken up like a man!" replied Daniel, frankly extending his hand; "I *cannot* spare the gal, for she's all I have to depend on; but don't look so down in the mouth about it. I'll tell you what we can do: take up your three hundred dollars and buy the lot that lies next ag'in mine and her Uncle Bentley's farm. There is our cabin already built, and a housekeeper in it. Martha won't make a worse daughter for me because she is your wife," and Daniel Hart pointed to his dwelling with a smile on his face, yet a single tear brightened in his eye; for the love which he bore his daughter was the most holy feeling of his life.

"I never *was* so happy!" exclaimed Downs, grasping the rough hand of his father-in-law and giving it a vigorous shake. "And Martha, dear girl—she thought you must miss her help, and would not consent to go away. I left her with tears in her eyes."

"She is a nice gal," replied Daniel, drawing the back of his rough hand across his eyes. "I only hope she will make you as good a wife as her mother was to me."

"I know that Martha loves me; she told me as much this morning, and I'm not afraid of the rest," said Downs.

"Of course," said Hart; "what is there to fear? But see, Martha is at the door; the breakfast will get cold; come in and we will talk it all over."

Downs took up his rifle, and the two went toward the house together.

Scarcely had Daniel Hart and his companion closed the cabin-door after them, when a horseman came from a cart-path leading through the woods, and dismounted near the chestnut. He looked cautiously around, saw the great gap cut in the trunk of the tree, and driving his horse back

into the woods again, tied it to a sapling down in an abrupt hollow which concealed them from the clearing.

When the man appeared once more in the open space, he took up Daniel's axe, examined it closely while he dislodged the tiny chips that clung to its edge, and tried its sharpness with the ball of his thumb.

"The chips are moist and green yet; the helve is warm with the old man's handling. I may as well make myself scarce at once, for the crusty fellow will be hanging round home till night: I am certain of that from the way he has begun his day's work."

As the young man muttered these discontented words to himself, he set down the axe and moved away as if to seek the woods again; but as he turned his head and cast a look toward the cabin, he gave a start; his eyebrows worked and knit themselves over his flashing eyes, and with a half-suppressed oath he looked around as if to ascertain some means of reaching the cabin which might not expose his person to the inmates.

"There were two. I saw them through the window. Who is he? Let me make him out—let me but fasten an eye on him and he is done for. Woodworth, nor any other man, shall cross my path now and live!"

Once more he sent an oath through his grinding teeth, and plunged into the hollow where his horse was tied. The fine animal turned his head and greeted his coming with a low neigh; but his master lifted his heavy boot and gave the poor creature a kick that made him wheel and run back with a violence that almost tore the sapling up by the roots.

"By Jove, you had better stop that!" exclaimed the man, infuriated by the noise, and giving the bridle a savage jerk.

"Stand still, stand still, or I'll bleed you with a new-fashioned lancet!" he exclaimed, through his shut teeth, and drawing a bowie-knife from beneath his hunting-shirt, he plunged his arm back to drive it into the heart of the rearing animal. But, as if comprehending his danger, the beast leaped back with a fierce impetuosity that broke the sapling sheer in twain, and plunged down the hollow just time enough to escape the fearful blow launched at his chest. So fierce had been his attempt upon the horse that Hurst lost his balance and fell forward to the ground, ploughing the rich earth up with his knife for half a yard before he could recover himself. The furious man started up, gazed after the horse an instant, then shaking the soil from his knife, he thrust it back to his bosom with a low, savage laugh.

"You have saved me a hundred dollars by that plunge, old fellow," he said, still gasping with passion. "I was a double fool to let you break loose, though. Mike, Mike, easy, boy, easy! Come back, so-ho—so-so!"

It was surprising that a voice so fearfully savage the moment before could have been modulated on the instant to the low, silky, and wheedling tones which this man adopted in persuading the horse back to his keeping again. It sounded through the woods like the mellow tone of a bird calling for his mate. But the horse plunged on till the call terminated in a low, sweet whistle. He had leaped across a rivulet which ran gurgling along the depths of the hollow, and his front hoofs were buried deep in the opposite ascent when that whistle came sighing through the bushes. He stopped suddenly, with his ears still laid back and his hoofs on high. A shiver ran through his limbs. His ears began to tremble as they arose to their natural position—his forefeet sunk slowly down, and, wheeling

gently round, he crossed the brook and crept up the hill, like a hound called back from the chase.

"So, old fellow, you have come back, have you?" muttered Hurst, tying the broken bridle and tightening the knot across his knee with both hands; "it's well for you that I have no other horse to carry me to The Bend—now see if you can stand quiet, will you?"

This speech terminated with another oath, while Hurst knotted the bridle to the splintered trunk of the sapling and moved away. He crept stealthily around the edge of the clearing, taking care to conceal his progress by the underbrush that grew thickly in that portion of the wood. At length he reached the little patch of vegetables which lay between the forest and the back windows of the cabin; here he paused a moment, peered anxiously through the thick foliage to the right and the left, then parting the branches with his hands, he stole softly forth, and, darting across the garden, crouched down beneath one of the windows, where he lay for two or three minutes holding his breath and afraid to stir a limb, lest he should agitate the creeping plants that clung around the window, and thus give notice of his presence.

At length he arose cautiously, first to one knee, then to a stooping, and, at last, to an upright, position, which brought his face to a level with the window. He lifted his hands, and parted the net-work of convolvules and flowering beans that draped the sash, with a cat-like caution that scarcely shook a drop of dew from the host of purple-bells that clustered around him. Having thus made an opening which commanded the interior of the cabin, he remained motionless, except that now and then his fingers clutched themselves together, and once he unconsciously crushed a cluster of the scarlet bean-

flowers which fell against his palm with a violence that shook the whole vine.

What a tranquil and happy scene it was that the bad man gazed upon! In the centre of the cabin stood a small table, covered with a coarse cloth of snow-white linen, a plate of savory ham—the ruddy color of each slice relieved by the pearly and golden circle of an egg, which formed a tempting mound upon it—stood in the centre, warm corn-bread, a plate of potatoes, with their dark coats torn just enough to reveal a tempting and mealy richness at heart, a saucer of wild honey, and another of golden butter, composed the wholesome repast, of which Daniel Hart and his guest were partaking.

The farmer had filled his plate a second time. Hard labor and the morning air had given him a keen appetite, and his thirst seemed in proportion, for Martha was holding forth, but without lifting her eyes to his face, his third cup of rye coffee, on which the heavy cream was mounting like a foam, when Hurst looked in upon the peaceful group.

Downs ate but little, and Martha—pretty, warm-hearted Martha Hart—did nothing but blush every time she lifted her eyes from the bright tin coffee-pot, and deluge every cup she filled with a double quantity of cream, that little brown hand of hers was so very unsteady. It seemed so strange for her to sit there, with her father directly opposite, and John Downs lifting those bright, saucy eyes to her face every other minute, and then dropping them as if he knew perfectly well that he ought to be ashamed of himself there before her father. It was as much as Martha could manage to sit still and wait on the table. It seemed a marvel that her dear old father could eat so heartily. Every thing seemed looking at

her with peculiar meaning. The old house-dog there on the hearth, the cat, as she moved demurely across the room, the purple morning-glories trembling around the windows, all appeared perfectly aware that every thing was settled between her and John Downs, but rather astonished that the old man should take it all so quietly, when they had every one of them heard him protest a thousand times that it would be the death of him if she were ever to think of getting married.

Martha tried to act as if nothing particular had happened. She was frightened to death at the idea of meeting her father's eyes, and as for John Downs, it really was too bad! Why on earth did he keep looking at her from under those long eyelashes! She was perfectly certain in her own heart that she had never once looked at him since they sat down to breakfast: nothing in the world would tempt her to do any thing so forward! Dear, pretty Matty Hart! how did she know that the young man at her left, in the green hunting-shirt, was looking at her, if she never turned her eyes that way? The conical-shaped coffee-pot, with its streaming contents shut in by a lid marvellously like an overgown extinguisher, was bright as hands could make it, but not quite brilliant enough to reflect the motions of her lover. Still Martha Hart was very positive that she had given Downs no sort of encouragement to look at her in that way, and, of course, she knew best, for the flowers that trembled and shook off their dew, and seemed laughing at her through the window, were not more modest or innocent than Martha Hart with all her coquettish ways.

At length, when Daniel Hart had transferred the last morsel of ham from the plate to his lips, and drained his

coffee-cup for the third time, he drew back his chair and looked at Downs.

"Well, now, John, I am ready to talk over the business as soon as you've a mind to——"

Daniel Hart was here interrupted in his speech, for Martha recollected that moment that she had no spring-water in the house, and the haste which she made to get her sun-bonnet and lift the pail to her arm quite disconcerted the whole party, but it was only for a moment. Daniel settled back in his chair again, after giving a glance at her burning face as she lifted the wooden door-latch, and muttering to himself,

"Well, well, it's only human nature: I was young once myself," he addressed Downs again.

And there was that vile man listening to every word which passed between the honest farmer and his son-in-law—he heard it all—how John Downs had taken a fancy to Martha long ago in Rockland county—how he had sold out all his possessions, consisting of a span of horses, a yoke of oxen, and some young cattle, and started off West, in less than a month after the Hart family left the county. He had deposited his money with Judge Church, and was determined to buy land, and settle down in the neighborhood; but Martha had put him off and off, till he was almost discouraged—or had been till half an hour ago: now he was just the happiest fellow on earth. Just as if it made any difference about the Bentleys: he was as ready to work for that noble man and handsome girl, as if they were his own blood relations—only give him a chance, that was all.

Hurst saw the brown hands of these honest men grasp over the table, and knew that he had another strong spirit to contend against.

Hurst was crouching amid the vines as Martha passed him, with the water pail on her arm, and the love-light brightening her eyes and sending its red to her cheeks. Her garments almost touched him as she turned a corner of the cabin, but he held his breath and shrunk close to the logs, listening to the conversation within, even while his kindling eyes followed the young and happy creature as she passed with a light step into the woods. When she had entirely disappeared he turned his eyes inward again, bent his ear, like a hound, and pressed his face close to the matted foliage, that no word passing between the two men at the table might escape him. He learned from their conversation that Gillian and her father had ridden forth at daylight to explore a tract of land, which they all thought of adding to the farm, and that Mr. Woodworth was expected soon, when he might carry Gillian away, and all must be settled before then. If they liked the land, it would be paid for to-morrow; the money lay ready at the Bend. As for Gillian, she was expecting her lover every moment. Then there would be a wedding in the settlement, and one bright face less in the cabin. After some ten minutes, Hurst drew stealthily back, darted into a patch of early corn that came up almost to one end of the cabin, and winding noiselessly through it, cautious as a serpent, not to shake a single silken tuft that streamed from the half-ripened ears, he entered the woods again.

"So soon! so soon! quick work, but I am ready—the job pleases me—it pleases me—so—so, fool—stand still, What, afraid of the knife yet? It has better fare on hand—so—so!"

These words were uttered after Hurst entered the hollow where his horse was tied. He had been fingering the

haft of his knife while muttering to himself, and partly drew it from his bosom as he came up. The still restive animal started at the gleam of the blade, which gave rise to the half-savage, half-soothing words which his master uttered as he unknotted the bridle. After looking cautiously over his shoulder, Hurst mounted to his saddle, and crossing the cart-path rode leisurely toward the spring where Martha Hart had gone a few minutes before.

A happy girl was Martha, as she passed through those thick woods down to the little spring which supplied the household with water! Every object around her bore a thrice pleasant look. When she turned down the little foot-path and came in sight of the fountain, it was gushing up quick and bright, with a sweet impetuosity, like the sensations of her own pure heart. It seemed rejoicing with her, smiling on her. How sweetly it flashed up from its mossy basin, dimpling and laughing as the arrowy sunshine darted through the heavy mass of foliage overhead and broke in a golden shower on the rivulet that danced down through the rich turf carpeting the earth all around. It fell athwart the roots of that gnarled old oak that twisted in and out among the rocks just above, like a knot of huge serpents charmed to sleep by the soft lullaby of the waters—and on the little hollow, choked up with fern-leaves, where the pretty stream lost itself and plunged into the earth again.

Martha came along the path, smiling unconsciously. She sat down beneath the shadow of the rock, with the water almost kissing her feet. A bird was overhead, and it began to sing till the leaves around its hiding-place shivered again, but she did not listen to the bird. Why should she? There was music enough in her own heart! She had trodden upon a tuft of wild blossoms, and the air

was perfumed with their dying breath, but she only knew that every thing was very lovely and tranquil around her. The very foliage and the glimpses of sky shining through, seemed rejoicing over her head like old friends, longing to come nearer and bless her. Her heart was brimming with joy; tears, the highest and most blissful drops that ever fell from the blossoms of a young heart, sparkled in those soft eyes; and there she sat, so quiet and motionless, bending a little forward like a wood-lily on its stalk, and none but the Almighty, who loves the joy of an innocent heart, knew how pure and entire that happiness was.

All at once a shadow fell on the spirit of that young girl. One of those strange, intuitive feelings, which seem like spirit-tones in the heart, came over her. There was no unusual noise in the forest, and yet she bent her ear to listen; still no sound, save the soft hum of summer insects, and such beautiful things as love the solitude, arose to startle her; but the feeling of dread was in her heart, she put back the mass of curls that had fallen over her shoulder, and listened still more intently. It *was* a sound, the tramp of a horse mellowed and broken by the forest turf. Certain that it was the approach of an enemy, Martha snatched her sun-bonnet from the ground, and, hastily filling her pail from the spring, turned breathlessly into the path. It was too late for escape! scarcely had she advanced half a dozen paces, when Hurst appeared in a curve of the path. She turned into the wood, though the undergrowth was so thickly tangled there that it seemed almost impossible to force a passage through. Hurst sprang from his horse and left it standing across the path, as he came quickly towards the breathless and startled girl.

"What, Martha, you are determined to fight shy yet?"

exclaimed the vile man, pressing close to the struggling girl, and attempting to take the pail from her hand. "Come, come, give it up; it's too heavy; you bend under it like a sugar-cane in the wind. Let me carry it, I say."

He took the pail forcibly from her hand as he spoke, and dashed half the water to the ground.

"Never mind," he said, with a disagreeable laugh; "we can go down to the spring and fill it again. I want to talk with you. Where is Gillian?'

"Gone out to ride. What do you wish to say?" faltered the terrified girl. "I thought you would not come again. I must go home—my father is waiting."

"Thought I should not come again? A pretty fellow I should be to take that proud girl at her first word. No, no, Miss Martha, I do not so easily give up an idea when it once gets into my head. Such girls as Gillian are scarce here in the bush."

While he spoke, Hurst swung the half-empty pail on one arm, and forcing Martha's hand through the other, dragged her toward the path.

"I do not wish to go down there—I *will* not, unless you drag me from the spot by force," said Martha, wringing her hand suddenly from the hold he had fixed upon it, and darting up the hill with the speed of a deer. She rushed through the cabin-door and pulled the latch-string in.

Hurst made one bound after her, then paused and listened. He saw Daniel Hart and Downs going toward the clearing, and heard the sound of hoofs coming softly over the forest sward close by. There was but one horse, and he trod daintily as if guided by a lady.

It is Gillian, and she has left her father behind, was Hurst's thought. What did he care for Martha Hart then? His sole object in detaining her had been to gain

some intelligence of Gillian—and there she was alone in the woods. His heart stood still; thoughts flashed through his brain like lightning; there was his opportunity. Gillian once in his power, what force could ever rescue her? One bold dash, and the fortune for which he had dared perdition, and the woman whom he adored and hated in the same breath would be his. Woodworth might come to find his promised bride another man's wife.

Hurst turned sharply, and went down to the woods. Gillian was riding quietly under the trees, enjoying the grateful shade. A crimson scarf, which was twisted round her neck, seemed to light up the path her horse was taking. She had left her father a mile back. There was a fresh clearing to be made, and he had turned aside to examine the timber, leaving Gillian to loiter on her way home and enjoy the shadowy repose of the woods. She had paused a dozen times within the last half mile—now to gather a handful of berries from the smaller growth of trees, and again to trace the delicate green vines as they trailed their scarlet berries along the forest moss and embroidered it with an exquisite woof of tiny leaves and fruit-drops. Then she came to a half-decayed stump, frosted all over with pale apple-gum moss, woven in thickly, as it were, with coral. Gillian's love of the beautiful in nature was intense. She could not traverse a path in the woods without stopping every ten minutes to examine some object of interest. When she saw this stump frosted with a rich overgrowth she sprang from her horse and began to gather some of the finest tufts in her hand. The horse, accustomed to these delays, turned aside, browsing lazily on a young birch thicket that grew near.

"Beautiful! oh, how very beautiful it is!" she said, holding up her red-beaded moss in a beam of sunshine

that slanted through the trees. "What a world of lovely things I shall have to show him when he comes!"

"Miss Bentley!"

Gillian started, and dropped the moss from her hand; for there, on the other side of the stump, stood Michael Hurst.

"Miss Bentley, fortune has for once been in my favor. I have another opportunity to urge my suit," he said, holding out his hand.

Gillian turned away in haughty silence. Twice before, within a fortnight, this man had persecuted her with his unwelcome importunities, and she was weary of repulsing him. Besides, she was alone in the woods, and his presence always struck her with a sort of terror.

He saw this, and a smile crept over his white lips.

"Lady, this is hard," he said.

She turned upon him like a young eagle.

"Sir, three times I have given you an answer to proposals which offend me! The property that I solemnly think belongs to my father, you have got; we gave it up without contest. Be content with that, and spare me farther importunity."

"Gillian, you will not understand me. The property which you surrender is nothing unless you share it. The very possession drives me mad. I have followed you here into the wilderness, praying, beseeching you to share this wealth. I love you, Gillian. God only knows how wildly I love you."

Gillian would not listen, but turned away in proud silence, looking anxiously toward her horse.

Hurst followed close.

"You will not listen—you will not answer?" he said, fiercely.

"No, I will not listen—I will not answer!" she replied. "How often shall I tell you that my hand is pledged—my faith given? Step aside, sir, and let me pass!"

Hurst got between her and the horse. She turned desperately and ran along the path.

Hurst sprang after her. A hound in full cry could not have leaped more fiercely forward. He grasped her arm, turned her round with a jerk, and when her pale face was close to his he laughed; not, as might have been expected, a coarse, ruffianly laugh; but low and sweet, with a tone that frightened the heart it thrilled.

"Come, girl, come! I do not want to frighten you. Go down to the spring—I have a great many things to talk over. How can you tremble so, close by the man that loves you better than any thing on earth?"

And, with a reed-like bend of his fine form, Hurst threw his arm around Gillian's waist, and attempted rather to persuade than force her toward the spring.

"I will not move a step. I cannot. Oh, Mr. Hurst, pray let me go! you frighten me almost to death!" cried the poor girl, trembling in every limb, while her ashy lips quivered with terror.

"How foolish you are, Gillian, to fear from one man—an old lover and true friend—that which pleases you in a fellow like one I could mention," said Hurst, girding her waist more firmly with his arm, speaking in a mellow and persuasive voice—a voice which sounded so like that of Woodworth that Gillian raised her large eyes to his face in wonder and new dread, but they sunk to the earth again, shocked by the conflicting passions which met their gaze in that handsome but evil face.

"Come, have done with all this childish nonsense," continued Hurst, "I only want a fair hearing. You were too

hasty the other day, when I came like an honest man and asked you to marry me, and I, like a fool, went off with my cause half argued. Stop, stop, there is no getting off now: I must be heard."

But Gillian writhed in the clasp of his strong arm, and looked wildly over his shoulder in hopes of aid from the house.

"Say what you wish, here, then," she said, wild with terror; "I will listen—take your arm away, and let me sit down—I will hear all that you have to say, if you do this."

"What, you would get a little nearer the house, and scream if I only lifted my eyes to that pretty white face of yours? No, no, Miss Gillian, I am not to be cheated in this way;" and, flinging his disengaged arm also around her person, Hurst lifted her from the ground and moved rapidly toward his horse. The poor girl struggled, her head fell back on his shoulder, and her terror found voice in a single sharp cry.

"Hush!" said Hurst, turning his face till she could feel the warm breath as it poured from his clenched teeth. "Hush, I say, or I shall be forced to quiet you with my handkerchief."

He moved toward his horse as he spoke, set her on the ground, still grasping her arm with one iron hand, as he sprang to his saddle and attempted to drag her up after him.

Another cry, sharp with terrible agony, broke from the lips of that poor girl. It was followed by a rushing sound in the path above—the crash of branches, the leap of a strong man, and the shout of a fierce voice in its rage.

"Villain!—Villain!" With this fierce cry Daniel Hart plunged like a lion down to the spot where his niece was

lying, pale and senseless on the earth. He sprung over her body with his arms outstretched and his eyes on fire—for one instant his iron hand clutched the folds of Hurst's hunting-shirt, but it was wrested from him by the violent leap taken that instant by the goaded horse, as he wheeled and darted up the path and out of sight, it seemed, with a single bound.

"Oh, if I had my rifle!" exclaimed Daniel Hart, in a hoarse whisper, as he lifted Gillian from the earth and laid her down again, for the stout man shook with rage, and that moment he was weak as an infant—"if I but had my rifle!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE BODY IN THE WOODS.

About ten miles from the residence of Daniel Hart, one of the largest tributary streams of the Mississippi made a sudden sweep inward, like a bent bow, embracing a rich tract of alluvial or bottom land in its curve, and forcing its outer banks back into the shelter of a range of hills, more broken and picturesque than is usually found in scenery composed almost equally of wood and prairie land.

Just within the curve of this bow, or directly on "The Bend," as the inhabitants called the plain which swept out from the embrace of the river, stood the county-seat. The entire district was but sparsely inhabited, and, as yet, the county town consisted only of a few log-cabins, half-

buried in luxurious corn-fields, two or three young orchards filled with trees, that had only decked themselves in the blossoms of a single spring, and one great frame dwelling, with verandas running across the front, and two chimneys of new bricks standing on the expanse of glistening shingles, like members of a volunteer militia company in flowing regimentals, whose pride it was to keep guard over the humble log-cabins and stick-chimneys which lay below.

A blacksmith's shop, so open in front that you could see the glowing iron even in winter as it poured a torrent of sparks from the huge hammer which ground it to the anvil, stood opposite the tavern; and this, with the noise of carpenters still at work in the interior of the building, lent a sort of bustle and business aspect to "The Bend," which those who visited it found rather cheerful and exciting after the dim solitude of their forest-homes.

A flour-mill, too, clattered cheerfully night and day in a hollow close by the river, and there was scarcely a day in the week when a group of men might not have been observed loitering around Judge Church's tavern.

It was Saturday, about five days after the visit of Michael Hurst to the Hart clearing, and the strangers gathered around the blacksmith's shop and tavern toward sunset were more than usually numerous. Three or four farmers had come from a remote part of the county with wagon-loads of grain, which could scarcely be converted into flour before the next day. Others had brought their horses to be shod, and, meeting with cheerful company at the tavern, were in no haste to return home.

The evening came on warm and sultry, but the blacksmith was hard at work; the sound of his anvil rang over the village, and the glare of his forge reddened

around him as the beautiful sunset fell through a bank of hazy clouds on the landscape without. A horse of light bay color, finely limbed, and with the look of a high-blooded racer, was tied with a stout bridle to an iron ring at the door-post, but though the hot sparks sometimes flashed close by his eyes, they only kindled up a little, as if some of the fire had shot beneath the lids; and though his nostrils dilated, he neither pulled at the halter nor seemed restive, for once when he had run back a little, a voice from the opposite tavern checked the fretful impulse, and left him standing with his eye to the flame, but with a slack halter and shrinking limbs. To the poor animal there was something in that voice more terrible than the shower of hot sparks that rained over him.

The voice came from a young man seated in the lower veranda of the tavern. His chair was tilted back, and his right foot rested upon his left knee, and though the fringe of his hunting-frock swept over a portion of the boot, its small size and unusually neat workmanship could not be entirely concealed. The man wore a fine otter-skin cap, which, being drawn over his face, left the upper part in shadow, but waves of thick hair curled up among the rich fur about his temples, and his somewhat prominent chin, upon which the light lay strong, was so delicately moulded that in repose his features seemed almost effeminate.

This man sat with half-closed eyes, smoking. Now and then, as he bent slightly forward to knock the ashes from his cigar against the sole of his boot, he glanced his eye through the bar-room window, which was open a little to his right, and seemed to listen. At such times the shadow which fell over his eyes was thrown on the temple, and the whole character of his face changed. It was a restless, wicked eye, which lighted up every fea-

ture with evil fire. This must have been a natural expression, for there was nothing calculated to excite or annoy him in the bar-room. Two or three persons only were gathered about the bar, joking each other, while the judge himself was busy crushing lumps of sugar in one of the small tumblers of greenish glass, which gave a dingy hue to the brandy he had just poured out for one of his customers. Michael Hurst, for it was he, had just drawn back to his old position, when two men on horseback came round a corner, and, as if rejoiced by the sight of company, urged their horses to a trot, and drawing up in a cheerful, dashing style, dismounted before the tavern.

Hurst started, and dashed down his foot with a violence that drew the chair forward till the front feet rang against the floor. The light struck full upon his face; it had all at once become white as a corpse, and his eyes glistened like those of a roused serpent.

The two travellers had been busy tying their horses to the posts of the veranda, and before they were at leisure to notice any thing Hurst had fallen back to his old position.

"Does not that look like Hurst?" said one of the men, as they came up the wooden steps together.

Daniel Hart cast a quick glance toward the seemingly half-sleeping man, knotted his huge fingers tightly together, and moved a step forward, but Mr. Bentley caught his arm.

"Remember your promise to Gillian!" he said, in a low voice, but his own limbs trembled with rage as he restrained the vengeance of the stronger man. "Remember, we have both promised," he added, drawing Hart toward the door, "but for that I have the best right."

"I have never broken my word!" muttered Daniel Hart, moving reluctantly on. "I never will, but it's tough work to keep my hands off him."

And with these words Daniel Hart and his brother-in-law entered the public house, but the cheerfulness with which they had dismounted at the door was entirely dispersed; not even the hearty welcome which they received from the persons at the bar had power to restore them to moderate composure.

"Why, who on earth is this, Daniel Hart?" said the Judge laying down the sugar-stick and holding out his right hand, with which he shook his neighbor's vigorously, while he passed the tumbler of brandy to a customer with the other.

"It seems an age since we've seen you at The Bend—and you too, Mr. Bentley. I was just calculating that your money would be so much clear gain in my hands, and had half dunned myself for the interest, when I get word that you are coming down to scrape it up, interest and all, for the land-office."

Bentley was about to reply, but the words died on his lips. In turning his eyes he had seen the white face of Michael Hurst peering in at the window; the face disappeared instantaneously, but Bentley felt as if those glittering eyes were still fixed upon his burning forehead. It was rage rather than terror that arose in his heart at the sight of those eyes, but to a less brave man there would have been something startling in their sharp and fiendish glare. The evidences of emotion visible in Bentley's face were mistaken for embarrassment by the good-natured Judge.

"Well, well," he said, "if you want the money, that's enough; put up with me to-night, and I'll try to make it out in the morning."

"Not here—I will not sleep under the same roof with that man," said Daniel Hart, drawing Bentley aside, and speaking with great earnestness.

"I would rather go myself," said Bentley, also in a low voice, "but it looks like a storm. If a hurricane comes up, we could never get through the woods alive."

"No matter, alive or dead, I *will not* stay at The Bend to-night," replied Hart, with suppressed energy, but his words reached the persons around the bar, and they looked at each other, a little surprised at his obstinacy, and the stern, wilful tone in which his determination was expressed. It seemed to them as if harsh feeling existed between the two men.

"Very well, I'm ready to start the moment our horses have been fed," replied Bentley, moving toward the bar. "I suppose an hour or two won't make much difference with the Judge?"

"None at all," replied the Judge, pointing to an old-fashioned chest of drawers in the corner; "the money is all ready in the old desk there. Go in and take a bite of supper while the horses are feeding. Come along, all of you."

The whole group put itself in motion and followed the Judge out into a back kitchen, where supper was laid in no very delicate style, but in rough and hospitable profusion.

Michael Hurst had been standing with his back to the railing of the veranda, his arms folded tightly over his chest, and watching with cat-like eagerness every thing that passed in the bar-room. The moment Judge Church went out, followed by the company, he glided softly down the steps, and across to the blacksmith's shop. The smith was busy at his bellows, and the roar of the air escaping

into the bed of glowing coals forced Hurst to draw close to the forge before he could make himself heard. When he felt the red light of the fire upon his face, he turned it away instinctively, or the honest smith might have been startled by its pallor and the fiendish expression lurking over it. A hostler coming round from the barn, with a measure of oats in his hand, saw him standing there enveloped, as it might seem, in a crimson mantle by the flames, and wondered what traveller had entered the town without his knowledge; for though Hurst had been for more than a fortnight boarding in the tavern, and was well known to the man, his face was so changed with the working of evil passions that it seemed like that of a stranger.

"Have you fastened the shoe?" said Hurst, hoarsely, touching the blackened arm of the smith with his finger, for he had spoken twice, yet could not hear the sound of his own voice. "Have you fastened the shoe?"

"No," said the blacksmith, leaning upon the pole of his bellows, and wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the coarse sleeve that was rolled above his elbow.

Hurst uttered an imprecation.

"I haven't fastened that shoe," continued the smith, quite unmoved by the fierce words that had reached his ear, and resuming his hold on the bellows with one hand, while he raked the hot coals over a half-formed circle of iron glowing in the forge; "but I have put on a new one that fits like a lady's slipper. That horse of yours has got a neat hoof, rather too delicate for common workmen; I had to make undersized nails for fear of breaking it."

"Is he shod? Have you done with him?" exclaimed Hurst, sharply.

"Half an hour ago!" Taking up a huge pair of pincers with which he dragged forth a mass of iron from its

bed of fire, and seizing his hammer, the smith gave it one swing with his right arm, and it came crashing down upon the anvil with a force that sent a storm of fire-sparks over the young man, as he passed and untied his horse from the iron-ring at the door.

Hurst led his horse across the street, and flung the bridle toward the man who was removing the bits from the tired animal from which Hart had just dismounted, while Mr. Bentley's horse was quietly munching the oats which had been set before him.

"Here, take care of the creature, will you?" he said, testily. "You need not stay to rub him down—he is half-starved."

The hostler caught the bridle with a dexterous movement of one arm, and quietly drawing the head-stall back to the neck of Hart's horse, pushed the measure of oats toward him with his foot, and then moved away.

"Halloa, blockhead! where are you going?" cried Hurst, with an oath. "I don't want him taken to the barn; turn him into the white-clover lot, and see you put up the bars."

The man wheeled round sulkily, and grumbled below his breath. After crossing the road, he took down a set of bars, slipped off the bridle, and gave the spirited animal a light blow with it. This sent the horse bounding into a field, which was hedged in from the highway by a heavy rail-fence, and swept back from the tavern some ten or twelve acres of short but fragrant sward, where it was lost in a forest of heavy timber. The tavern itself stood in one corner of this field, and a cross-road bounded the opposite end, which ran up from the forest and intersected the turnpike some thirty rods below the house.

Hurst stepped within the hall, but stood watching the

man till he put up the bars and flung the bridle down in a corner of the veranda; then he turned away and went into the supper-room.

He took his seat at the lower end of the table, so noiselessly that his entrance was unobserved, till Judge Church happened to look that way, and uttered an exclamation at his paleness. The rest of the company fastened their eyes, as with one accord, upon his face, the moment this exclamation escaped the host. A spot of living fire flashed into either check, and he clutched his knife and fork hard, as if angered by this general observation.

"I have the tooth-ache—have been racked to death with it all day," he said, in a clear and low voice, strongly at variance with the expression of his face.

"I will not sit at the same table with him," muttered Daniel Hart, grasping Bentley by the arm. "Come, let us go!"

They both arose; but, as if overcome with pain, Hurst left his seat and went out. Obeying the impulse given by his companion, Hart sat down again, and no one observed that they had intended to leave the table.

When they went into the bar-room, after supper, Hurst was walking up and down the room. He seemed to be agitated, or in great pain, but there was only one small candle in the bar, and he kept in the shadow.

Meantime, the Judge was busy counting out the money which Mr. Bentley had come to take up. It was much of it in pieces of gold, with several bank notes of small amount. After it had been counted over two or three times, the Judge emptied it into an old shot-bag—where it had been previously stored—tied it up with a piece of twine, and handed it to Bentley, taking his promissory note from that gentleman as he delivered the money.

"Come, now, we have nothing to keep us here!" exclaimed Hart, drawing a deep breath, for the presence of Hurst seemed to oppress him. "Where are the horses?"

"They ought to be in the stable," said the Judge, turning a key in the sloping lid which closed a desk in his chest of drawers; "there is a storm coming up, or I am no judge of signs."

Hart had only heard the first part of this speech; he was eager to leave the room, and hurrying out to the horses, forced the bits into their mouths, though scarcely half the oats had been consumed.

"Come, come, brother Bentley, come—we *shall* have to ride fast, or the storm may break on us in the woods!" he called out from the veranda.

Mr. Bentley went out, followed by all the persons in the room, except Hurst. He stood motionless, near the window, listening to every word that passed, till the two men mounted and rode away. Then he stepped hastily to the bar, seized a decanter, and pouring out a tumbler half full of clear brandy, drank it off.

"Is your tooth no easier?" said the good-hearted Judge, returning to the room just as the young man was taking his hand from the tumbler.

"No, it keeps getting worse; I will go to bed and sleep it off—that is, if I can," he replied, turning his face from the light, and pouring out a spoonful of brandy, which he held in his mouth as he went up-stairs.

"That's a strange sort of a fellow," said one of the guests, who had been a boatman on the Mississippi. "How long has he been in these parts?"

"Only a few weeks," replied the Judge, to whom the question was addressed.

"What does he follow for a living?" persisted the guest.

"He's got some business with the land office, I believe," said the Judge, "and wanders off with the hunters sometimes when they take to the woods."

"Just so," said the guest.

Hurst was not mentioned again that night; but as if some association had been aroused, unconsciously, in the mind of the boatman, he began to talk about his wild life on the great river, and late in the evening was describing the fearful scenes which attended the hanging of the Vicksburg gamblers.

It was a terrible subject, and told at a fearful hour; for the hurricane had burst upon them—strong, loud, and terrible. It came blowing up from the forest, and swept by, in its wrath, till the great half-empty house rocked like a cradle. The chimneys toppled over, and crashed upon the roof overhead. The verandas were torn away, like a handful of rushes, and yet that little group of men sat, awe-stricken and fascinated, listening to the rough eloquence of the boatman, as he described the storm of human passions which he had witnessed, amid the terrible, but still less awful storm of the elements that raged around them.

Hurst went to his room and set down the light, reaching it far away with his hand, that it should not shine upon his face. He felt as if his thoughts were branded in crimson-writing on his forehead, and that some eye might read his purpose there. His conscience whispered falsely. That forehead was white as marble, but shrunk and knitted together with dark passions. Foolish man! Why did he thrust away that candle so fiercely? The Almighty required no human light—no letters of blood upon the brow—to read that which was passing in his heart.

He took a bowie-knife from his bosom, and felt the point—tried it against the seat of a chair till it seemed as if the well-tempered steel must have broken off in the wood. Then he drew a portmanteau from under the bed, and took out a hunting-frock, darker than the one he usually wore, and without the yellow fringe. Having put this on, and supplied its place in the portmanteau with that which he had flung off, he drew the otter-skin cap over his forehead, and blowing out the light, crept from the room. He had nearly reached the stairs, when a thought seemed to strike him; for he stole back, and, after searching in the dark, found the leather string suspended from the wooden latch in the door of his room. He tied a knot in the end, which he tightened with his teeth, and drew it back so far into the gimlet hole which perforated the door, that any one anxious to enter would have supposed the thong drawn through by some person within. He listened a moment by the door, and then glided, with quick and noiseless steps, down the stairs.

There was no light in the hall; but the ceilings were yet unplastered, and a network of faint rays fell through a thousand crevices of the new lath, which was the only partition between him and the bar-room. The bar-room door was partly open, and directly before it sat a group of travellers, listening to the exploits of the boatman. This man checked his speech an instant, and looked up as Hurst darted by, but the movement was quick as the flight of an arrow, and, satisfied that it was but a shadow made by the flaring candle, the man went on, warming in his description as the storm rose

Once out of the house, Hurst crept in a stooping posture around the veranda, thrust his arm through the railing, and softly drawing forth the bridle that had been cast

there, followed the windings of the fence till he came to the cross-road. He turned the corner with a bound, and, drawing one sharp breath, ran swiftly down towards the wood. Here he turned again, followed the line of brush fence that separated the forest from the clover-fields, and, keeping himself in the wood, looked around for his horse. The animal was grazing near the centre of the field. A low, sweet whistle made him pause just as a tuft of fragrant and dewy clover was folded in his lip—again that whistle came from the wood, still faintly, but a little sharper than before. Without staying to crop the handful of blossoms which were even then filling his mouth with fragrance, the animal gave a start, flung up his head, and sprang away. With a single bound he cleared the fence, and stood by the side of his master.

Hurst took a heavy silk handkerchief from his pocket, tied two of the corners together with a piece of cord, and slipped it over the horse's head, where he arranged it with the cord knotted across the chest, and the square of crimson silk spread out upon the animal's back like a saddle-cloth.

"No saddle, no blanket to-night, old boy," he muttered, hoarsely, while the horse bent his head for the bit. He put on the bridle, drawing the throat-latch so fiercely that the tormented creature shook his head and ran back. Hurst clenched his hand, opened it again as suddenly and patted the restive creature on the arching neck.

"So—so," he muttered, loosening the strap, which cut cruelly against the poor animal's throat. "No noise—no prancing here. So—so, be quiet, boy, take care of the brush, and you shall be coaxed like a girl, for once—so—so."

With these words, uttered scarcely above his breath,

though the mustering storm would have drowned his loudest tones, Hurst sprang upon his horse, and, guiding him cautiously through a corner of the wood, came out into the cross-road, about half a mile from the town.

"Now for it!" burst from his lips in a whisper, which seemed like a shout suppressed with difficulty. "Now for it!"

There had been a moon that evening, but the coming storm overwhelmed and shrouded it from sight. Still, a pearly glow now and then shot along the small and gloomy clouds that came surging up from the north, and spread themselves over the sky like a lead-colored pavement, torn and agitated by unseen hands. But soon even the pearly gleam disappeared. It had lingered among the clouds, the last smile on the face of heaven; now it was swept away, and left nothing but blackness and gloom behind. The air seemed pressing down to the earth, thick, stagnant and sultry. A dismal sound came up from the forest, as if the elements were chained among those giant trees, moaning at their captivity and wrathful with each other. Still, amid darkness and gloom, that horseman sped on. The road was narrow, and full of ruts. Stumps, in some places, stood half crumbling away in the very wagon-track; but, with a loosened rein and knees pressed hard to his fleet animal, that doomed man plunged onward to his fate. The thunder, which had been all the time muttering on high, now pealed and crashed above him—the lightning came down in sheets of lurid fire, shedding a bluish tinge over the corpse-like hue of his face. Still his horse plunged on amid sheets of flame or black darkness, never checking his speed for an instant.

All at once that desperate rider drew the curb with a

sharp pull, which brought the horse's foaming mouth down upon his chest. He staggered, fell back upon his haunches, and recovered himself with a snort of pain. All the time, the rider was bending forward till his face almost touched the arched neck of his beast, his knees were pressed convulsively to the drooping sides of the stumbling animal, and he strove again to catch the sound of hoofs which had for an instant reached him through the storm.

"On, on!" The words came hissing through his shut teeth, but scarcely had the gallant horse made a bound forward when the curb was fiercely drawn again.

"It is somewhere close by. Oh, if the lightning would but strike again!"

It did strike, with a crash that made the brave horse leap in the air, though he had never shrunk from the lightning before. Not three rods before them a dry tree was shivered in ten thousand pieces, and every splinter shot forth a stream of fire. For one moment the horseman recoiled, the next he recognized the spot.

"Thank God, there it is!" he exclaimed aloud, and with this blasphemous thanksgiving on his parted lips, he struck the horse and dashed into a cart-path, revealed by the stricken tree. On, without swerving from the path an instant, he passed directly under the burning tree, and was engulfed in the dark woods beyond.

Daniel Hart and his companion had ridden hard, in hopes of making their way through the woods before the storm came on, but there was full six miles of forest, cut only by the narrow and broken road, through which night travellers passed with some danger even in the best weather. But they had scarcely cleared a third of their way when the rain began to fall in great heavy drops, and

the storm mustered around them with terrible force, The heavy farm-horses which they rode stumbled in the deep ruts, and became almost unmanageable as the thunder came crashing peal after peal overhead, and the woods around seemed a-fire with lightning. Still the riders urged them forward, for the peril seemed equal if they returned or pursued their way home.

"Great heavens! did you see that?" exclaimed Bentley, reining in his horse with a firm hand, and pointing in the direction whence they had come.

"I thought it had struck somewhere," replied Hart, checking his horse for a moment and looking back. "Ha! it is the old tree at the cross-roads. How the flames shoot up! it was dry as tinder. Thank Heaven, while it burns we shall have light enough to keep our horses from breaking their knees in the confounded mud-holes."

"Hear that!" exclaimed Bentley, and his face changed in the red light.

"Heavens and earth! it is upon us—what shall we do?" cried Hart, wheeling his horse suddenly, and the light from the burning tree revealed his face also white with terror as he rode back a few paces, and drew up again, agitated and irresolute.

"We may as well go forward; there is nothing to choose. It will be upon us long before we can clear the wood either way," shouted Bentley, looking back.

"Lord preserve us! it will be an awful gust, and the girls alone!"

Hart spoke loud and joined Bentley as he uttered these words, but the noise of the elements would have overwhelmed a band of trumpets, and no one heard him. Terrified into almost supernatural exertion, the two horses plunged on, stumbling, leaping, and sometimes staggering

through the storm like drunken creatures. The riders spoke to each other again and again, shouted even, but the rushing wind swept away their voices, and but for the quick flashes of lightning which every instant revealed their pallid faces each to the other, they could not have kept together.

Still the terrific storm was not upon them in its full might. The thunder boomed and crashed overhead, the giant trees were laced together through and through with fiery lightning, the wind was strong and high; but far down in the forest came a still more terrible sound. The whirlwind was coming up from the dark north, heaving onward with a fierce, rushing roar, and crashing down the majestic forest in its path—on and on it came, like a mighty ocean heaving loose from its foundations. Now it was upon them! The two horses stood still, quaking with terror, their riders cast themselves forward upon the shivering beasts, clung to their dripping necks, and they too were motionless.

On it came, gathering new strength and terror. The hoarse winds, the thunder, and the noise of giant trees uprooted like reeds and dashed to the earth, mingled together and deafened the very heavens.

The air was black with clouds of mangled foliage—great limbs of trees, masses of loose leaves, vines twisted asunder and saplings torn up by the roots, went rushing by. The wind now scattered them abroad—now drove them together in masses. The lightning shot its fiery tongues through and through them, and the rain mingled with it all, not with the soft lulling sweetness of water-drops that descend gently from the clouds, but blent with all the turbulent elements that made the night horrible.

Still the horses crouched their limbs together and buried their hoofs deep in the earth, and the riders clung to them awe-stricken and breathless—all at once the ground began to heave under them. The earth was torn up all around—a great oak, whose roots were tangled under the soil far across the road, fell crashing close behind them. The maddened horses leaped forward—the outer branches of the fallen tree almost brushed the riders from their seats, and the huge trunk fell across the road just where they had been an instant before. The horse which Daniel Hart rode cleared the tree first, and was plunging on in the darkness, when a sharp cry reached his ear, even through the storm. Hart grasped the bridle with both his strong hands, and, putting forth all his strength, wheeled his horse round, for Bentley was still behind. A flash of lightning revealed the horse without a rider; Bentley was upon the ground—a black mass, that might be a heavy limb of the fallen tree, or a human being stooping over it, was betrayed for an instant, and all was dark again.

"Bentley, are you hurt?—answer me, answer if you are not killed," shouted the farmer, hoarse with terror.

He listened—no sound—nothing but the fierce storm.

"Speak! do speak! I dare not ride on, the horse might tread you to death in the dark. Are you calling out?—the storm is so loud I might not hear if you did—try, try, the least shout will tell me where you are!"

Another flash of lightning revealed Bentley's horse, and, with a shout of joy, Hart saw the figure of a man rise from the earth and spring upon his back. The next instant all was darkness again; but Hart felt the horse of his companion pressing close to his, and the two animals urged their way, breast to breast, through the abating storm.

"Were you hurt?" shouted Hart, anxiously, feeling in the dark for his companion's hand, which hung motionless and dripping wet by his side.

"No, no, a limb swept me from the saddle, that is all!"

"Thank God it was no worse!" exclaimed Hart, in a voice which bespoke the hearty gratitude which he felt, and, wringing the damp hand which he had seized, the good man uttered another fervent "thank God!"

That instant a glare of lightning passed over them. Hart saw the face of his companion, and his warm fingers tightened on the hand they had unlocked.

"How white—how strange you look!" he said, powerfully agitated. "Brother, own it, you are hurt. I hardly know you with that face!"

The hand which Daniel held was wrung harshly from his grasp, and the reply which reached him, like all that had gone before, was broken and half-drowned by the storm.

"No, no, it is only the lightning. My horse is lamed, though. You must break the way for us."

As these words were uttered, the speaker fell back and rode behind Hart till a light gleamed from a little window in the distance, like a star braving the storm to guide the wanderers home.

"There, there the girls are up and waiting for us," cried the glad father; and urging their horses on, the travellers dismounted at the cabin-door.

"The horses have had a tough time of it," said Hart, shaking the water from his garments; "they must be fed first."

"I will take care of them—go in, go in," exclaimed his companion, holding forth the bag of money; "put this away—I will come back in a minute."

Daniel took the money in one hand and pulled the latch-string with the other; his companion turned abruptly when the light fell on him through the door, and led the horses away without answering Hart, who shouted after him to hurry back, for the girls were waiting with supper on the table.

Sure enough, supper was on the table: a cake of rich corn-bread warm from the fire, a young chicken nicely broiled, and a saucer of golden butter just from the churn, stood temptingly ready on the snow-white table-cloth. There was pretty Martha—her cheeks all rosy with the heat—pouring a stream of sparkling hot water from the clumsy kettle into a little britannia tea-pot, bright as silver, which had been standing on the hearth at least two hours, with the lid temptingly thrown back, and ready at any moment to receive the water, that kept singing away in the kettle. Gillian was sitting by Matty, rather anxious, for the storm had terrified her; and crouching in a corner were black Dinah and Liz, each with an apron flung over her face, frightened half to death by the thunder-bursts that had shaken the cabin to its foundations.

"So you *have* come—I thought it was you," exclaimed Martha, closing the lid of the tea-pot, and going up to her father, her sweet face sparkling with gratified joy. She flung her arms around the old man's neck and kissed his wet cheek.

"Have you been much frightened, darling?" said the old man, tenderly taking her hand in his.

"Oh, yes, very much, till I heard you coming. We were so afraid that you would get hurt in the woods. I have been crying here half the evening, yet it seemed as if all would turn out well, and so it has: here you are, but Uncle Bentley, he did not let you come back alone?"

"Oh, no—he is turning out the horses; but a tree was struck close by us, and he got a fall—nothing to speak of, though," added the kind man, observing that the cheek of his niece turned pale.

"You are sure no one is hurt?" said Gillian, coming up and winding her fingers around the huge hand, which clasped them kindly.

"Yes, yes, but what is the matter—what ails your hand? You are not afraid of a little water, are you?"

Gillian turned to the light and looked earnestly at the fingers her uncle had been clasping; they were crimson with blood.

"Father, father, you are hurt, and will not tell me," Martha exclaimed, pointing to Gillian's hand. "Oh, father, how could you deny it? See, your sleeve is spotted—your hand is wet with it; tell me, tell me, where are you hurt?"

"Hurt!" exclaimed Hart, going close to the light, where he examined the sleeve of his linen coat and his crimson hand in a state of painful bewilderment; "hurt! no, I am not hurt; but where did this come from?"

His ruddy cheek became a shade paler, as he shook the drops from his fingers—for there was water as well as blood upon his hand—and an expression of doubt and anxiety stole over his face.

"It must be your father's, Gillian," he muttered at length, stealing a glance through the door, as if anxious for the appearance of his friend. "His arm may be cut; ah, I remember, that made him fling off my hand so savagely; well, it may not be much after all!"

Gillian stood watching her uncle, as he muttered these words in a voice so subdued that it scarcely reached her ear.

"Uncle," she said at length, laying her hand on his arm, "tell me, tell me all! where is my father?"

"Out there with the horses, I tell you," replied Hart, shaking off the strange feelings produced by the blood upon his hand, and speaking out with his usual frankness. "There, put away the money in my chest—I had forgotten it."

Setting the bag of money on a corner of the table, Hart began to examine his garments over again, muttering to himself with seeming wonder at the state they were in.

Martha took up the bag with a shudder, for the canvas had a red stain upon it; she placed it in the chest pointed out by her father, and gave him the key with a forced smile, which looked ghastly on lips so pallid as hers had become.

"Come now, bustle about and get some dry clothes ready against your uncle comes in; he is dripping wet, I can tell you," said Hart, with renewed cheerfulness; "but first bring me a basin of water to wash my hands. Where on earth can this have come from?" he muttered, while laving his hands in the basin, and once more his face took an anxious expression.

Martha had already prepared dry garments both for her father and uncle. Hart went into his own little bedroom and came out dry and comfortable. Still Mr. Bentley did not appear. Martha seated herself at the table, broke the corn-bread, and poured out a cup of tea. Her father took the cup, set it down untasted, and, leaning his elbows on the table, waited for his companion to come in. At last he started up and went to the door; a horse was standing near, with a saddle on and his bridle dragging along the wet grass. It was his own horse. The old man started out into the rain, caught the horse and led him toward the

stable, where he expected to find Bentley. All was still in the log-stable—the door was open, but no living thing stirred within. Hart shouted aloud, again and again; he went into the house for a lantern, and searched everywhere for his friend; Gillian and Martha followed him in silence, the tears rolling down their pale faces, oppressed with anxiety such as had never filled their hearts before. It was all in vain; no voice answered the anxious shout of Daniel Hart. Once he heard something like the quick tramp of a horse down in the woods; the sound lasted but an instant, and he, followed by the young girls, went into the house, filled with trouble and consternation.

The whirlwind went by; the rain ceased, and the wind died moaning among the torn foliage; the moon came out in the firmament once more, smiling, like the eye of an unconscious infant, over the wild scene below. It looked calmly upon the earth, torn and ragged, and harrowed up as it had been with the storm—on the shattered trees—the herbage broken and soiled, and heaped together in ridges on the places it had beautified when the sun went down. Like a Christian soul, eager to fling a mantle of charity over the ruin which sin had made, that peaceful moon wove a vail of misty silver amid the devastation which, but for it, would have been dreary indeed.

But there was one object lying in the cart-road deep in the forest, which the pure moonbeams but rendered more horrible. It was a human form, flung like a slaughtered animal across the trunk of the oak which Hart had seen uprooted but an hour before. The lax limbs were entangled in a bough which was broken, bent and crushed by their weight; the face was turned upward, white, cold and ghastly, among a mass of leaves, matted together

by the dark stream which trickled heavily down from the body upon them.

There were none of those pleasant sounds of dropping water which would have followed a common storm in the forest, for the winds had swept the rain away as it fell, and a hush like that of death was all around. But that small current of blood, welling slowly down over the drenched garments, which hung around the body, through the crushed leaves to the earth, drop by drop, fell upon the sweet air with sluggish and horrid monotony. Still the moonbeams smiled upon the scene as they had smiled upon the blossoming turf the night before.

The smothered hoof-fall of a horse, smiting his way through the mud, gave another sluggish sound to the still night. It grew slower and more laborious as the jaded horse drew near, and stopped altogether some paces from the uprooted oak. A man, whose thin face looked sharp and haggard in the moonbeams, dismounted and struck a fierce, unsteady blow, with a stick he gathered up from the wayside, which sent the poor animal tearing down the road. The branches of that fallen oak crashed under him as he rushed through it. The body slid downward a little, and the horse plunged, with clinking stirrups and loose bridle, deep into the forest. When this sound had entirely died away, the horseman crept toward the oak softly, as if afraid of arousing the body to life. He looked neither to the right nor left, but moved on, with his face toward the body, though his glittering eyes were fixed on the dark trees beyond, not on the gloomy object itself.

The man stooped down as he drew near the tree, crouched lower and lower till his knees sunk in the ground, and groped about in the mud and herbage, as if in search of something. His hand touched the blade of a knife,

half-buried in the earth; he grasped it by the point, sprung to his feet with a sharp breath, and holding it before him, clenched eagerly with both hands, laughed a horrible choking laugh as the blade shook in the moonlight.

"You will bear no evidence against me now, old friend," he said, in a voice that fell upon the air so strange and hoarse that he started and looked over his shoulder, as if another man had spoken his thoughts. All was still, but the murderer had been frightened by his own voice, and slunk away with his face still turned back toward the body, though he had never once looked upon it.

Another horse was tied in a hollow, scarcely twenty paces down from the road. Through all the hurricane, and with the lightning firing his eyes, he stood without wincing; but now that he saw his master coming heavily toward him, he began to paw the mud with his hoof, and gave a faint neigh. The man parted his lips, and tried to check this manifestation of joy, but his words died in his husky throat, and mounting with difficulty, he rode away, faint and wavering to and fro on his seat.

CHAPTER XL.

THE DESERTED CABIN.

THREE weeks after the events related in our last chapter, a horseman rode slowly through the clearing before Daniel Hart's cabin and dismounted beneath the huge

chestnut, which was yet standing with its trunk cut through to the heart, and all the foliage on the upper branches hanging withered and drooping in the morning sunshine. As the man passed from under the tree his foot struck something upon the ground. It was Daniel Hart's axe, rusted and wet with dew, which had been lying upon the same spot till the grass and strawberry vines had crept over and tangled themselves around it so completely, that, but for his accidental stumble, it might not have been discovered. The man lifted the axe, examined it closely, and muttering—

"There is nothing here but rust—downright honest rust"—rested the implement against the tree, and moved across the clearing.

Daniel Hart's cabin stood desolate and uninhabited, like a forsaken bird's-nest, in the midst of its little vegetable garden—no wreath of smoke went curling up from the stick-chimney in the quiet morning air, and, though it was near the breakfast hour, no snowy napkin streaming from the window proclaimed the waiting meal. The door was unlocked, and our horseman had but to touch it with his foot to gain entrance into the dwelling.

How lonesome and neglected it was! A few ashes lay upon the hearth, caked together with the water that had rained down the open-mouthed chimney. A bed stood in one corner, made up neatly, and covered with a pretty patch-work quilt; but the pillows were spotted with mildew, and the same damp mould had eaten its way in many a broad patch over the glowing colors of the quilt. The back window, close by, was open, and a mass of morning-glory vines, entangled with scarlet runners in full flower, had forced their way through and crept along the wall. They had twisted themselves around one of the bed-posts,

and were creeping over the head-board, where they hung in a light and graceful wreath, rendering the decay and stillness around yet more melancholy by contrast.

The man who gazed upon this scene was a backwoods constable, rough and uncultivated; but even he was affected by this picture of home-comforts so completely abandoned. He had come to search the house, but moved about with a soft tread, and unlocked the cupboards and that large chest with a bunch of keys which he took from his pocket stealthily, as if his heart would not permit him to handle with a rude hand the household gods of another man. He started up from his knees by the chest, and dropped the garment he was examining, like a guilty one, when a noise at the window disturbed him. It was only the house cat, gaunt and thin with hunger, which had just come in from the woods, and stood staring at him from the window-sill, with a flying-squirrel in her jaws. The poor animal had attained a fierce and savage look, from solitude and the wild raids she had been compelled to make for food; but she dropped her prey and crept toward the man, purring mournfully, and rubbing herself against his thick boots.

"Poor puss, poor puss," murmured the man, stooping down to smooth her rough coat with his hand.

But, as if she had not seen that he was a stranger before, the cat snapped angrily at his hand, and darted away to the squirrel, which she seized in her mouth and carried under the bed, where she remained, growling fiercely, and peering at the stranger, from under the valance, with her round, savage eyes, as she devoured her victim.

After he had examined every thing in the rooms below, the man went up a ladder which led to the garret, where he continued his search among the barrels and bunches of

dried herbs which it contained, but evidently to no effect, for he came down the ladder, muttering,

"There's nothing here—nothing on 'arth that can tell ag'in him, and I'm as glad of it as if I'd caught a bear in a coon-trap. Consarn me if I can believe the old chap's guilty arter all."

With these words the constable went out, closing the door carefully after him, and mounting his horse, made the best of his way to The Bend.

Judge Church was walking up and down the veranda, in front of his tavern, when the constable rode up.

"Well, neighbor, well!" exclaimed the kind-hearted man, "what news?—how have you made out?"

"Just as I expected. There's nothing in the cabin but the fixin's that belong there, and they're nigh upon sp'iled; for my part, I never could see the use of going out there ag'in."

"Never mind, Johnson, never mind; that flinty lawyer would insist on it, and you know it won't do for me to interfere. They mistrust me, I can see that; but they needn't—they needn't! I always liked Hart. It goes ag'in my feelings to believe him guilty; but if they prove it—if he has killed that noble fellow and then robbed him, I shall do my duty, Johnson. I must do my duty!"

"And I must do mine, too," replied the constable; and he added, bending down nearer to the Judge: "but it will be a tough job to tie the halter round that old man's neck; between you and I, Judge, when you have done your part of the business, and my turn comes, there may be a log missing from the old jail there!"

A bright gleam shot to the Judge's eye, but he shook his head reprovingly.

"No, no Johnson that will never do; law is law; but

hush, hush—don't think of any thing of the kind yet. We must do our duty—the laws must be maintained, Mr. Johnson!"

The Judge spoke these last words in a raised voice, and accompanied with a warning look, which the constable understood; for just then Michael Hurst came sauntering round a corner of the house, and slowly approached them. The appearance of this man had been much changed since the night of the storm; his features had become sharp and thin; a restless, anxious expression would constantly break over them, notwithstanding the listless air which he always assumed. His figure had shrunk away till the hunting-frock, which he always wore, hung loosely over it. All this gave a neglected look to his whole person, combined, as it was, with unusual disorder in the remainder of his dress.

"Halloa, Hurst!" said the constable, glancing at the young man's dress, which was even more roughly put on than it had been the day before, and resting his eyes at last on the clumsy boots, which gave a still more slovenly air to his person, "you are so much like one of us that I did not know you at first. Glad to see you taking to the brush like a man, at last. There was no living sociable with a chap who carried a white handkerchief week-days, and had his calf-skin boots blacked every morning. I tell you what, it makes us plain homespun fellows mistrustful."

Hurst approached them with the heavy, restless air of a man who had known but little sleep for many nights; but when Johnson uttered the last word he lifted his eyes, which seemed almost black from the dark shadows around them, and cast a keen glance from the constable to the Judge.

"Mistrustful," he said, with a forced smile, "mistrustful of me?"

"Not now, that you dress like a man, and have given up pinching your feet out of all shape," replied the constable. "But what have you done with the rights-and-lefts? Give them to old Brown; let him hang them up at his door for a sign. Come, bring the things out, and I'll leave them as I go along!"

"You would only get one of them, at best," said Hurst, with an unnatural laugh. "The hostler got tired of blacking them, I suppose, though I paid him well enough for the trouble."

"So he rubbed them with tallow, and spoiled the polish," cried the constable, laughing.

"No; worse than that. He lost one boot altogether. So I was obliged to patronize old Brown," replied Hurst, with affected carelessness.

"A cunning fellow, that hostler of yours," said Johnson, nodding to the Judge, and taking up his bridle.

"I say, Hurst," he added, turning again to the young man, "you wanted an order to see Daniel Hart, one day last week; I am going down to the jail now, you can walk along, and I will let you in."

Hurst hesitated a moment. "Are his daughter and niece there now?" he inquired.

"Oh yes, poor gals, they never leave the old man."

"Well, wait a moment, and I will go with you," replied Hurst, turning to mount the tavern steps.

"Is he acquainted with Hart?" inquired the Judge, addressing Johnson the moment Hurst was out of hearing.

"Not that I know of," was the reply, "but he is hand-and-glove with the prosecuting attorney, and it would not answer to refuse him."

"Just so," said the Judge, rather anxiously, "but give the prisoner a hint before he goes in; the fellow is silky as an ear of green corn, but I don't like him. He may be put up to this by the attorney, and so take advantage of any thing he can get out of poor Hart. Put the old man on his guard—you understand!"

"Yes, yes; I will see to it," replied Johnson hastily. "Come to think now, I may as well ride on and leave orders for the jailer to let him in. If we go together there will be no chance to caution the old man."

"Ride on, then," replied the Judge, "I will tell him how it is!" and, with a friendly shake of the hand, the Judge and the constable separated.

After a little time Hurst descended from the room, where he had been arranging his dress, and walked hurriedly down the road toward the county jail, which stood on the outskirts of the town.

The county jail was built of logs, and erected after the usual fashion of such buildings, but the windows were heavily grated, and the huge logs were bolted together with iron bars, which formed a massive wall scarcely less vulnerable than granite itself. The doors, too, were knobbed with great spike nails, and bolted with massive bars, just as they came from the forge. Altogether, though rudely built, the jail was not only strong but well guarded, and it must have been a desperate man indeed who could hope for escape when once immured within its rugged walls.

But the stout farmer, who was the only important prisoner in the building, had little thought of escape. If the massive logs could have crumbled to dust at his feet, Daniel Hart would not have fled one step from the captivity in which his friends and neighbors had placed him.

Still imprisonment was a weary trial to an old man who had been all his life an active tiller of the soil—a healthy, enterprising, cheerful farmer. He felt restive, and sometimes almost sullen, cooped up—as he expressed it—like a barn-door fowl, with its wings clipped; sometimes he gave way to fits of childlike melancholy, for—innocent or guilty of his brother-in-law's death—the old man could not but feel the event deeply; the more so as Bentley's noble and suffering daughter was always near, to remind him, by her sad and mournful attempts at cheerfulness, how terribly she felt the event which had rendered her young heart desolate.

Sometimes Daniel Hart would give way to fits of sturdy indignation against those who had placed him in confinement. Again he would admit, with simple-hearted candor, that appearances were strong against him, and he could not blame those who, on evidence so conclusive, had dragged him from his quiet home, and shut him up, to undergo a disgraceful trial for the murder of a man whom he had loved as a brother.

"I would not have cared," said Daniel to his daughter, on the morning after Constable Johnson had been at the jail to warn him of Hurst's visit, "I would not have cared a bean-stalk about being shut up here, if I didn't have to see every scoundrel that chooses to come in and ask me impudent questions. It's bad enough to know that your poor uncle is gone—don't turn pale, don't cry so, Gillian—you did not think it was me, if I did bring home the money with red hands! I know my own daughter will never believe it!"

"No, no, my father! my dear, good father! never think it again," exclaimed Martha, winding her arms around the stout old man and kissing his brown cheek, while she

trembled and wept with agitation. "But he is dead—dead and gone—and, oh father, how she did love him!"

"I know it, gal, I know it well enough," said the prisoner, taking the pale head of his niece between both his great hands and kissing her forehead, while his stout form trembled, and tears ran down his cheeks. "I know you loved him; he was as good a father as ever lived; but if he is in heaven, Gillian—and why not? he was good enough to go there, though he wasn't a member in any church—if he can only look down from heaven now, he knows that I didn't do it. I! Gillian, I loved him a'most as well as you did!"

Daniel Hart sunk down on a bench, that ran across his prison-room, and covering his face with both hands, sobbed aloud, though he was ashamed of his tears, and struggled hard against them. Gillian crept to his side, and bending her fair head upon his breast, tried to comfort him.

"I didn't do it, Gillian—the God of heaven knows I didn't. I'm growing thin. I look down-hearted sometimes, I know that; but it isn't a guilty conscience. They may hang me to-morrow, if they like, but I'll cry out 'not guilty' with my last breath. They shan't point you out, Martha, arter I'm gone, and say, 'There goes the gal whose father owned that he had killed his own brother, just as they swung him off.'. They shan't, I say—they never shall do that, Martha!"

And pressing the poor weeping girls to his broad bosom with both his arms, Daniel Hart swayed to and fro on his seat, protesting that he was innocent, and striving to soothe their grief. But when Martha, who lingered there last, moved on his bosom, and tried to murmur words of

confidence and hope through her tears, he burst forth again.

"Never mind, gal, never mind. They may do it if they like—my own neighbors, too—let them hang me, let them! I will take you with me. We will go together; for it would kill you to see them strangling your father like a dog—wouldn't it, child? That will be best; and we can be buried all in one spot, down in the woods. Don't take on so—don't take on, Martha—we shall find them in another world! Poor Bentley, Sarah and your mother too. But you must go with me, Martha, for the first thing that she will ask for will be the little gal she left behind for me to take care of, and I shan't dare to tell her that I've left you all alone in a world where an honest fellow can be hung for nothing, by his own neighbors!"

"Yes, father, we will go together. Neither of us have any thing to live for, now," said Martha Hart, rising from her father's arms far enough to wind her own around his neck, and laying her pale, wet cheek feebly down on his shoulder. "I am glad, father, that you want me to go with you. The world would be so lonesome—after that."

Daniel Hart laid his cheek down to the pale face upon his shoulder, and began rocking her in his arms again, without any other reply; for this rush of passionate feeling had exhausted even his great strength. By degrees they all became more calm, but Daniel was still holding the strengthless girl in his arms, and Gillian sat with dreary face in a corner of the room, when the prison-door opened, and Michael Hurst entered.

Daniel Hart sprung to his feet, set Martha down, and dashing the tears from his face with an impetuous motion of the hand, walked quickly to the further end of his

dungeon, where he turned, like a stag at bay, and waited in stern silence for his visitor to speak.

Almost for the first time in his life Hurst was at a loss for words; he turned pale, and then the color burned hotly up to his forehead, but shaking off the fascination which the prisoner's eye seemed to fix upon him, he moved gently to the bench where Gillian was sitting, and placed himself near her. Hart took a step forward, but before he could do more, his niece had left her seat and stood by his side, pale and still trembling, but with the tears quenched in her eyes.

"Well, sir, what do you want here? This roof belongs to the State. If I were a free man, it could not cover us both half a minute longer."

"I have come as a friend; pray hear me with patience," said Hurst, rising and moving toward the prisoner.

Hart flung one powerful arm around his niece, and motioned Hurst back with the other.

"Stay where you are, Mike Hurst; I care nothing about what place you stand in, but my niece, here, trembles as if a rattlesnake were crawling this way; keep where you stand, I can hear you well enough."

"Why do you treat me in this way?" said Hurst, soothingly. "You may believe it or not, but I only came to see if I could help you. The trial comes on to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed Martha, faintly, and drawing closer to the old man.

"The evidence against you is enough to convict any man," continued Hurst, still drawing toward the unfortunate prisoner. "The people are excited against you! There is but one way to save your life—for the trial once over, they will hang you at once!"

"But how—how can he be saved?" cried Martha, in a

voice of eager hope, which overwhelmed ever other sound.

"By escape, Martha, by escape," replied Hurst, drawing close to the excited girl. "It will be easy to break jail if he has a friend on the outside. I will be that friend —by to-morrow morning we can be safe in spite of all the constables in the country. I have money enough for us all—trust every thing to me!"

A flash of joy shot over the broad face of Daniel Hart as this prospect of liberty was presented to him, but it passed away, and grasping his niece's hand very hard, as if to prevent her speaking, he gazed on Hurst's face earnestly a moment, then said, with cool composure,

"And what do you expect to gain by it, if I should break jail?"

"Nothing, nothing, but your own good will, the kind feelings of your daughter, and some favor with this proud lady here," replied Hurst, stammering with embarrassment.

"And this is all you would be at?" continued Hart, still with great coolness.

"Why, Gillian knows how well I love her. I will marry her the minute we get to one of the river towns, in spite of all this odium."

"Just so," muttered Hart, grasping Gillian's hand still more firmly, as he felt her start and tremble. "But would you be kind to her?"

"She shall sleep on gold, if she wishes it," replied the young man, with flashing eyes, and, emboldened by the quiet way in which Hart seemed to be dropping into his plans, he attempted to withdraw her from the protecting arm of her uncle, but Hart put a hand against his breast and pushed him back.

"Not yet—she is not yours just yet. Look here, do you think that I murdered her father in cold blood?"

"What else can any one think? He has disappeared. His money was found in your chest. What else can be thought?"

"You believe this, and yet will help the old murderer to break jail!"

"I would do a great deal more than that for her sake," replied Hurst, casting a look of revolting tenderness on the helpless girl.

"Well, then, let me tell you, Michael Hurst, if I were the cold-blooded murderer that you think I am, I should consider my niece here disgraced by marrying a man who would help me to escape; but I am no murderer nor robber, either. I wouldn't run away if these jail-doors were flung wide open, and a troop of horses on the outside! If they want to try me for my life, let the neighbors do it. If they want to hang me, let them do that too. We are ready, Martha, we are ready," and, wringing his daughter's hand with a sort of mournful exultation, the old man looked firmly in the face of his anxious visitor. "My niece would sooner be with her old uncle on the gallows than your wife. Wouldn't you, Gillian?" continued the firm old man, folding the poor girl to his side with his disengaged arm.

Hurst began to expostulate again, but the prisoner cut him short.

"It's of no use, I tell you, I am determined to stand trial. I'm not guilty, and I won't sneak away as if I was."

"But they will hang you. Even Judge Church is turning against you now," persisted the young man, becoming more and more anxious.

"Well, let him," cried Hart, in a broken voice and dashing a tear from his rough cheek; "I shouldn't have believed it of him, though!"

Hurst was about to urge his purpose still further, but that moment the jail-door was swung open, and our old friend, the blacksmith, came in. He cast a sharp glance at Hurst as he entered, and shook Hart warmly by the hand.

"Well, I have just seen the Judge, and he says your trial will sartinly come on to-morrow!" exclaimed the good man, with a degree of cheerfulness which seemed remarkable under the circumstances. "They are all ready. The attorney has got evidence enough to hang fifty men; the whole would be complete as a nailed horse-shoe if they could only find the body. It's a pity they can't find the body, though, isn't it?"

Hart shook his head and muttered, "It is strange."

"Got any lawyer feed yet?" inquired the smith.

"No," replied Hart. "What could a lawyer do for me?"

"True enough, true enough," rejoined the smith, folding his dusty arms and laughing. "I will be your lawyer. What do you say, gals, shall I be his lawyer?"

"You have always been a good friend," said Martha, smiling faintly through her tears; "you have brought us our meals, and tried to cheer him up every day. No one has ever given us any hope but you."

"Yes, yes, depend on it, the truth will come out at last —such things always do one time or another."

The blacksmith turned half-round as he uttered these words, and cast a keen glance from under his heavy eyebrows at Hurst, who still lingered in the room.

The young man turned a little pale, but he tried to

smile, and muttered, in the low, silky voice which he could so well assume,

"Certainly, the truth always makes itself known at last."

"Well," continued the smith, wiping his hand on the leather apron which he always wore, and patting Gillian kindly on the head before he took leave of Hart, "keep up your spirits, all of you: that is half the battle. I have left some provisions with the jailer; don't let the thoughts of to-morrow spoil your appetite. Come, Mr. Hurst, are you going my way?"

Hurst hesitated and looked anxiously from the prisoner to Gillian, but meeting no encouragement to remain, he followed the smith out with evident reluctance.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE TRIAL AND EXECUTION.

On the following day The Bend was a scene of great bustle and excitement. News of the murder had spread all over the country, and every man or woman who could make business at the county-seat went there to witness the trial of Daniel Hart. Long before noon the main street was alive with people; wagons stood by the wayside, and a line of saddle-horses extended far down the fence which separated the tavern lot from the highway.

There was no court-house at the county-seat, and Judge Church had made arrangements for the trial to take place

in the bar-room of his tavern, which was the most capacious apartment at The Bend. Benches were placed in the body of the room, and, in order to give an air of magisterial dignity to the whole proceedings, a huge arm-chair was raised on a platform within the little enclosure which usually served as a bar. A host of decanters and glasses were removed from the little shelf which ran along the front, and two or three portentous-looking law-books, in new sheep-skin covers, occupied their place. As yet, the Judge had not taken his seat, and a dense crowd was gathered before the tavern, which filled the street almost across to the blacksmith-shop, where our friend, the smith, was hard at work preparing shoes for one of the half-dozen horses that had been brought to his door. Never had the good man worked with so much vigor as on that morning, when all else seemed to have taken a holiday. His face glowed in the fire-light; great drops of perspiration rained from his brow, and he swung the heavy sledge-hammer over his head with an impetuosity that made the anvil ring with deafening noise over the crowd of persons jostling each other and talking warmly about the trial, with their faces turned in eager curiosity towards the county jail.

The murder of Mr. Bentley had caused great excitement in the country, not only because the man himself was a general favorite, but from the fact that Daniel Hart, the person about to be arraigned for the trial, had been held among the most peaceable and honest farmers in the county. Notwithstanding the evidence, there might have been many found in that crowd who openly expressed a firm conviction of his innocence, while others seemed willing to pursue him with that reckless and wild spirit of persecution which is apt to follow the man accused of a capital crime all over the world, and which has but little restraint

in many of our frontier States, where the will of the people, even now, often usurps the place of law and justice.

At length there was a slight confusion manifest near the jail, and, while the crowd swayed round that way, Daniel Hart appeared, walking firmly up the street between two constables. His port became more erect as he drew near the crowd; and though somewhat pale, his countenance was both firm and mild in its expression. Once or twice a look of sorrowful reproach came to his eyes, as they happened to fall upon the form of some old friend shrinking back into the crowd, as if afraid that an accused man might address him. Again those deep-set eyes flashed gratefully when a hand was thrust toward him and a friendly voice called out—

"Keep up your courage, neighbor; the darkest hour is always just before day."

As he approached the tavern, the crowd in the hall and veranda made a rush for the bar-room, while the remainder fell back and formed a lane for the prisoner to pass. He was followed close by three females—Gillian, the blacksmith's wife, and poor Martha. A rough, hard-featured, but good-hearted woman was the blacksmith's wife. She was proud of her courage in thus standing by the unfortunate, as she expressed it, and walked through the throng, supporting Martha's feeble steps, with the mien of a newly-enlisted grenadier. Her navarino bonnet, which had been fashionable some years before, was set back on her head, and its immense sugar-scoop front, flaring up from her honest face, gave a still more decidedly military dash to her appearance. She waved a plump hand, encased in its yarn glove, to her husband, who stood at his shop door nodding his round head in approbation of her proceedings, as she mounted the tavern steps and followed

the prisoner, almost carrying her companions, into the temporary court-room.

The Judge had taken his seat in the bar when they brought the prisoner in. On his right hand, but outside the railing, stood the prosecuting attorney, turning over one of the new law-books with intense interest; on the left side was Constable Johnson, with a large sugar-crusher in his hand, which he now and then struck down upon the railing with great emphasis, as he called the court to order.

Hart was brought in and placed on a bench opposite the Judge, who scrupulously averted his eyes from the prisoner's face, while the jury was impanelled and the whole preliminaries entered upon. Never before had a court been conducted with so much of imposing form at The Bend. Every one looked grave, some even solemn, as the prisoner was arraigned. Hart stood up; his lips turned white, and the hands, which he clasped over his breast, shook a little, but his eyes were bent full on the Judge, and he answered, "Not guilty, not guilty, so help me God!" in a voice that swelled clear and full through the listening crowd.

As the prisoner sat down again, Martha cast a look over the crowd, rose to her feet, and, supporting her faltering steps by pressing her hand to the wall, went round to the bench he occupied and crept timidly to his side. Gillian followed her, pale as death, but with a firm step, and sat down by her cousin. He did not turn his head or seem to be conscious of the action, but the lines about his mouth began to quiver, and he shut his heavy eyelids hard together once or twice, as if determined to force back the gathering moisture before it had time to form into tears.

This stern effort to subdue the feelings tugging at his

heart, joined to the feeble and desolate air with which his daughter had performed her simple act of devotion, had its effect upon the impulsive and ardent beings who surrounded them. That pretty creature, so young, so pure and helpless, as she crept through the outskirts of the crowd, like a weary fawn following the hunted stag even among the hounds, and crouched down by the only being left to her on earth, touched their sympathies more than a thousand orations would have done. Then the proud beauty of Gillian, the solemn dignity with which she attested her faith in the old man's innocence, had its effect. Though rude backwoodsmen, feeling, good and generous feeling, was vital in the tough hearts which composed the crowd. A whisper ran through the throng, many an unequal breath was drawn, and more than one heavy lip trembled without speaking. The foreman of the jury—a bluff, hale old fellow—drew his coat-sleeve across his eyes two or three times. The Judge turned uneasily in his chair, and seemed to be diligently counting the glasses crowded on a shelf behind him; while the blacksmith's wife lifted a flaring cotton handkerchief to her face, shook her huge navarino bonnet mournfully, and sobbed aloud.

"This will never do," whispered the prosecuting attorney, leaning toward Michael Hurst, who stood close behind him; "who put the girls up to this stage effect?"

Hurst only replied by a sarcastic and yet ghastly smile. The pompous young lawyer then turned to the judge.

"May it please your honor, I desire that the young women there may be removed from the court until they are called up as witnesses," he said, pointing toward poor Gillian and Martha.

The blacksmith's wife flung back her navarino, grasped the handkerchief in her hand and gave the lawyer a look

that would have demolished a man of common nerve. The judge turned hastily on his seat, "I'll see you—" He checked himself just in time, took up one of the law-books, as if to seek for some authority, and then replied with solemn dignity—

"The court has decided that it is no business of yours where the girls sit."

Daniel Hart, who had grasped his daughter's hand and half risen, sunk back to his seat again, as these words fell on his ear, and a murmur of approbation passed through the crowd.

The attorney turned very red, muttered something to Hurst in an under-tone, and, after a good deal of ostentatious preparation, arose to open his case. The chain of evidence which he proposed to lay before the court was indeed such as left but little doubt of the prisoner's guilt. He was ready to prove that Hart and the deceased had come to The Bend together on the night of the murder, the one with no ostensible business, the other to receive a large sum of money. Eager words and gestures had passed between them at the tavern. Hart had insisted on riding home through the storm, though the deceased more than once exhibited great reluctance to go After the two disappeared in the woods together, Bentley had never been seen again, but two days after his horse was found wandering along the highway, with his saddle torn and soiled with blood, one of the stirrups gone, and the bridle hanging in tatters about his head.

Michael Hurst and two other men from The Bend had gone to the forest in search of the body, but nothing was to be found except the marks of some violent struggle near the cross-roads. Foot-prints, both of man and horse, sunk deep in the mud, were trampled all over the road,

just where a huge oak had been flung across it by the storm. Two or three small branches of the oak, which seemed to have been crushed by some heavy weight falling upon them, were broken, and some of their leaves matted together with blood, while a black stream had flowed over the trunk and stained the earth half a yard round. Most of the blood must have flowed after the rain had ceased, or it would otherwise have been washed away. But further than this, no trace of the body could be found, which would not have been the case had the death been accidental. The same company had proceeded to the double log-cabin which had been the mutual residence of Hart and his victim. There they had found the prisoner, his daughter and Gillian Bentley, the murdered gentleman's only child, with a couple of black people who lived with them as help. Hart would give no account of Mr. Bentley's disappearance, but persisted that they had ridden home together the night before, safe and well. A bag of money was found, locked in Hart's chest; a linen coat with blood-stains on the sleeve was discovered beneath the bed, and Hart's daughter had acknowledged that the stains were fresh and wet upon it when her father returned home on the night of the storm.

When the attorney had prepared the court for this evidence, he sat down, and the examination of witnesses commenced. Several persons who had been at The Bend that night were called up, and among them the Mississippi boatman. Michael Hurst was among the last. He gave in his evidence in a clear, straight-forward manner, as if every word had been studied by heart; but his face was ashy-pale, and he never once fixed his eyes on any man, but kept them bent upon the floor, or turning restlessly from one thing to another all the time he was

speaking. When he sat down, Martha Hart was called. She arose very feebly, but did not move from her father's side. When the attorney began to question her, she made an effort to speak, and thought that she did, poor thing, but the whisper that escaped her lips was so faint that no one heard it.

"Tell the truth, gal, tell the truth," murmured the prisoner from beneath the hand which shaded the agony working in his face. "Tell the whole truth."

The girl cast one look of anguish on the old man, and, summoning all her energies, found voice to speak. She admitted that her father had reached home late at night; that he came alone, with blood upon his hand, and gave her some money, tied up in a shot-bag, which she had locked up in his chest. But she said also, that her father had insisted that Mr. Bentley had ridden home with him to the door, had watched and waited for him all night, and that he was about setting forth for The Bend in search of his friend when persons came to arrest him.

She sat down, trembling and faint, amid the sobs and murmurs of an excited audience. Gillian was called next. She only confirmed what Martha had said, but ended with an expression of solemn trust in her uncle's innocence.

The Judge asked Hart if he had any witnesses to produce, and if he had no counsel.

"No," said the old man, lifting a face on which the agony of a strong spirit was written. "No, Squire Church, you won't believe me, and I have no other witnesses. I don't want any counsel."

The good Judge sank back in his chair with a disappointed look. The attorney arose, wiped his mouth, swallowed a drop or two of water, and commenced a bitter and cruel attack upon the prisoner; but neither the

judge nor jury were accustomed to the restraints imposed on their comfort by this protracted flood of eloquence. They sat restlessly in their seats; one tilted his chair back against the wall, another stretched his feet out to the nearest bench, and, at last, the Judge, after trying various changes of posture, turned, with an air of desperation, toward the shelves behind him, and, taking down a box half-full of cigars, selected one for himself and passed the box over to the jury. Two or three of the bystanders helped themselves as the box passed them, at which the Judge nodded a good-humored welcome. Then he kindled a match, and, deliberately igniting his own cigar, leaned back and smoked away with grave composure, only stopping now and then, as some more lofty flight of eloquence broke from the lawyer's lips, to knock the ashes away from his Havana against the railing of the bar.

"Pass it to him, pass it to him—have you no manners?" whispered the Judge to Constable Johnson, who was leaning forward over the bar, in order to place the box upon its shelf again.

The constable started back and went eagerly up to the prisoner, but Hart refused the kind offer, at which the Judge shook his head two or three times, for he took the refusal of a prime cigar as an evidence of down-heartedness which nothing could overcome.

As the lawyer drew toward a close, the Judge became much agitated; the cigar went out between his lips, and his face looked pale amid the smoky atmosphere that hung around him. When the man sat down, there was silence for more than a minute, profound, death-like silence, and then the Judge arose.

"Daniel Hart—neighbor, neighbor!—have you nothing

to say for yourself?" he exclaimed, with a burst of feeling that made the jury start.

Daniel Hart rose to his feet; a clear, strong light was in his eyes, and, though somewhat pale, he stood firm and collected among his old friends.

"Yes, I have something to say. You will not believe me, but I will speak for myself. All that they have sworn against me is true, and yet all that I have said is the truth also. I did come to The Bend with poor Bentley. I loved the man like a brother, for he was my sister Sarah's husband, and a prince on earth. We came to get the money which Judge Church owed him. I found that man in the tavern." Here the old man lifted his hand and pointed to Michael Hurst. "He had insulted my daughter—he had outraged my niece and tried to carry her off by force. My blood boiled when I saw him. I had promised the poor gal not to touch him, and yet I found it hard work to keep my fingers from his throat. This was the reason I wanted to get home—this was what I was saying to brother Bentley.

"We started home. The storm was awful—trees fell around us like grass before a scythe. It was terrible dark, but we kept together till a great oak was torn up and fell crash almost over us. Then I thought Bentley was knocked from his horse. I saw him on the ground, and—so help me God, I speak the truth!—for one moment it seemed to me as if another man was bending over him. I rode toward him, but the lightning went out, and, while I was calling to him, he rode up to my side. I had his hand in mine once. The lightning struck again and I saw his face: it was white as a corpse, and did not look natural, but the voice sounded like his, though it was smothered by the noisy wind. I left him at the door to

put out the horses, and went into the cabin with the bag of money, for he put it in my hand as I gave up my bridle. The gal was right: my hand was wet with blood when I went in. I was not hurt—the blood was not mine. It might have been his. The God of heaven knows I did not shed it!"

The prisoner sat down, but rose again in an instant.

"Neighbors!" he said, stretching forth his hand to the jury, while his eye flashed and his stout form dilated with intense feeling; "neighbors, I have told you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God!"

He sat down amid the breathless crowd; no one spoke, no one moved, but a sound rung over them from the blacksmith's anvil, clear and full, like the quick toll of a bell. All at once that ceased, and the silence was profound. It was broken at length by the blacksmith's wife, who started up, forcing her way to the door and went out. When she came back her husband was with her. He made way for himself and wife up to the bar, and addressed the judge, who had just arisen to commence his charge to the jury.

"I say, squire, supposing you give me a chance first," said the smith, rolling down his sleeves; "I reckon as likely as not that I shall have a considerable finger in this pie before it's cooked."

"Do you wish to give evidence? Do you know any thing about it?" inquired the Judge, eagerly.

"Well, I should think it likely that I did, squire, so just give me the oath. But first bend down your head here."

The Judge bent his head while the smith whispered something in his ear. He then gave some directions to

the constable in a low voice, and that dignitary moved round to the other side, and took his station by the door.

The oath was administered, and then the blacksmith unrolled a dirty handkerchief which he carried under his arm, and took out a muddy boot, a horse-shoe, and a scrap of red silk. He had scarcely laid these things down before the Judge, when some confusion arose at the door. Michael Hurst had attempted to pass out, and the constable was forcing him back again. In the struggle Hurst's face was turned to the crowd; it was ghastly white, and when he raised his voice to expostulate, it was choked, and so husky that very few heard him.

"Order, order—keep still," resounded through the crowd, and Hurst, restored to some presence of mind, drew back to his old station.

"Well," said the blacksmith, "I want to tell you how I came by these things, and get back to my work again. Well, neighbors, you remember the night of the storm, some of you were in town, I shod your horses and worked late to get through. Well, among the rest, Michael Hurst, there, came, in a terrible hurry, and wanted a shoe put on that handsome bay critter that he rides. The animal has a delicate hoof, so I was obliged to make nails on purpose for it—small nails, such as I never made for any other horse on earth.

"Hurst took the horse away just before the storm came on; he never took that trouble before, but yet I thought nothing about it till a good while after. I saw Hart there and Mr. Bentley ride away from the tavern: just after that a man came prowling round the stoop and along the fence. Still, I didn't think much about it, but after I'd done work went home, feeling rather uneasy

about a coal-pit that I had set to burning on some land of mine, down below the cross-roads.

"I got up in the morning, before daylight, and rode down to the coal-pit, expecting to find it blown into ten thousand flinders by the hurricane. The road was blocked up with trees and brush, but I got along tolerably well till I came to the cross-roads, where I meant to cut through the woods. I found a tree choking it up, and was walking my horse round it, when what should I see but the body of a man lying among the branches. It was Mr. Bentley, as dead as a door-nail—at any rate I thought so then."

"Was he alive? Was he murdered? What did you do with him?" exclaimed several voices from the crowd.

"Keep cool, neighbors, keep cool," cried the smith; "there, you have nigh about set that poor gal into fits," he continued, pointing to Gillian, who was bending toward him with clasped hands and a look of wild anxiety in her face. "I shouldn't wonder now if she faints clear away when I tell you that her poor father was cold and stiff, with a knife-hole in his side, but yet there was a breath of life in him."

His predictions were right. With a single gasp, Gillian fell across her uncle's lap quite senseless, but every one present was so occupied with the witness that she remained unnoticed.

"I have powerful strong arms," continued the blacksmith, extending his great hands, "so I took the poor fellow up and carried him down to the coal cabin. There was a bunk full of straw in one end, and a spring of water close by. After I had worked over him a while, he came to a little, and asked where I had found him. Of course, I was rather curious to know how he came to be bleeding

in the brush. He seemed loth to tell, but at last owned that when he was riding with Daniel Hart through the storm, some one fell upon him in the dark, flung him from the horse, plunged a knife in his side, and left him senseless on the ground. He suffered terribly, poor fellow, and the thought that Hart had attempted his life seemed to hurt him worse than his wound. He begged me not to mention the matter, as he was determined not to prosecute the old man, and he feared that the affair could not be hushed up if people knew that he was wounded. It came hard for me to believe that Hart was a murderer and robber. I was in hopes that something would turn up to clear him, so I made up my mind to keep quiet. I doctored the poor gentleman up as well as I could, and went home, promising to come back after dark with a wagon, and take him home with me.

"When I came to the cross-roads again, on my way home, I searched about among the brush to see if I could find any thing. There was a little hollow close by the road, and up one side I saw that the sods were torn, as if a horse had lost his foothold and slipped down; a sassafras bush, close by, was broken, and one of its roots torn up, and right there, tangled with the root, I picked up a horse-shoe. I knew it in a minute, for the small nails had been torn from the hoof, and stuck in the shoe yet, and I declare for the first minute my heart flew into my mouth. Well, I searched round in hopes of finding something more, but this scrap of silk, with a bit of twine tied to it, was all that I could find. It did not seem of much consequence, but I brought it home with the horse-shoe.

"As I came into town, Hurst's horse stood in a crook of the fence down in the judge's house-lot, so I just

climbed the bars and examined his hoofs. The one that I had shod, the night before, was bare as my hand. By this time I was pretty well satisfied who was the murderer, but yet any other man might not have been as certain as I was. I went over to the tavern, and asked about Hurst of the folks in the kitchen. They told me that he was sick in bed, and had been all night dying with the toothache. Just then the hostler came down with my gentleman's dandy boots in his hand; he had brushed one, when I happened to see something that made me anxious to get the dirty boot. The hostler went out a minute. I snatched up the boot and made for home.

"Well, squire, I took the horse and wagon, and went after Mr. Bentley that night. My old woman, here, is a first-rate nurse, and he began to get better after a while, but this minute he's as weak as a baby, trying to sit up a little for the first time this very day. I never told him a word about Hurst, nor any thing concerning the trial of Hart, for he was so weak that it might have killed him. Besides that, I wanted to see what kind of a lawyer I should make. Now, squire," continued the blacksmith, "I've taken oath that this shoe is the one which I put on Michael Hurst's horse at eight o'clock the night of the storm, and that I found it just after daylight on the very spot where Mr. Bentley was stabbed. Now look at this boot; the clay upon it is red, such as can be found at no spot hereabouts, except just at the cross-roads. I took the boot with my own hands, and measured it by half a dozen of the tracks left on the spot. They fitted it like a glove. Now, squire, here is the piece of silk; it seems to me that if you'll just examine the pattern closely, it looks very much like the silk handkerchief that Hurst,

there, has got around his neck. He had on the same concern the night I shod his horse."

Every eye in the room was turned upon Hurst, who cast a sharp glance behind him, and made another desperate effort to force his way through the door. By this time the crowd was in a state of wild commotion; those outside pressed up against the windows, eager to learn what was passing in the court-room, where the excitement was increasing every moment.

"Off with his handkerchief! off with it!" thundered from various parts of the room. But Hurst flung the officer back, and struggled desperately against their attempts to untie the square of crimson silk twisted carelessly around his neck, but it was secured at last and handed to the Judge. The jury crowded around the bar, eagerly watching the Judge as he unfolded the handkerchief. A corner was torn away, and the fragment produced by the blacksmith perfectly fitted the rent. Besides this, a pattern of black ran over the crimson groundwork, which rendered the handkerchief somewhat peculiar, and this pattern was also in the fragment. The jury had scarcely satisfied itself of the fact when a portmanteau was brought into court, which an officer, who had been sent to search Hurst's room, had found under the bed. It was unstrapped, and a hunting-frock drawn forth, torn and mouldy, but, notwithstanding this, traces of blood were found upon the skirt. When this object was held up before the jury, the excitement became intense. Three or four men leaped through the window into the bar-room, packing the crowd still more closely together. The hall was filled with stern, eager faces, pressing forward to the door, and men stood so thickly together that lights had to be passed from hand to hand overhead, as

those who carried them found it impossible to force a passage into the court-room.

"Make room, make room, I tell you!" cried a female voice from the crowd; "she will be stifled here," and, with her arm flung round the drooping form of Gillian Bentley, the blacksmith's wife forced a passage for the poor girl where half a dozen men would have failed. Wherever her immense navarino rose upon the crowd, men fell back, and made way for her where no room seemed to exist. As she passed through the door, Hurst darted forward, and in a moment would have been safe in the dense mass of human beings that filled the darkened hall. But Johnson saw the movement just in time, and flung him back against the bar.

"He is trying to escape—he will get clear," cried a voice from the window. The cry was followed by a moment of comparative silence; men bent their faces together and whispered in groups, while the crowd outside uttered words that made the Judge turn pale. The accused man heard them also, and, springing over the bar, drew his knife and called upon the Judge to protect him, in a voice sharp with agony, that rang over the multitude like the cry of a hunted animal. His cap was off, his throat was bare, and the breath, as it panted through, seemed choking him. His face and hands were deathly-white, but a spot of scarlet burned, like a live coal, in either cheek, and specks of foam flew from his mouth. The sight of a knife, drawn in their midst, exasperated the crowd, and when the desperate man leaped over the bar, with the weapon gleaming in his hand, many thought that he was about to attack the Judge. Those in front were pushed up against the bar till the railing cracked beneath the sudden pressure. Half a

dozen hands were outstretched to pull the man away, but he drew back of the Judge, and made an insane effort to intimidate them with his knife.

The object which possessed the crowd, up to this moment, had only been a vague determination to secure the accused man and lodge him in some place of confinement. The people were greatly excited; their sense of justice had been outraged, an honest and innocent neighbor had been hunted within a step of the gallows, before their eyes, by the wicked man who stood armed and menacing them in the very bar of justice. All the elements which lead to violence were aroused in their hearts; still the wretched man might have been safe but for this display of his knife, which concentrated the wild passions already fermented into a stern resolve. There was no shout; the tumult grew less than it had been; men turned their fierce eyes on each other, and a hoarse whisper ran through the crowd—

"He will escape—he will escape the law."

These were the words that went hissing from lip to lip through the room, out from the open windows, and along the street. Still there was no tumult, but the crowd closed slowly up—up till the bar gave way. A sea of eyes—dark, fierce, terrible eyes—met the wretched man everywhere; they glared on him from beneath the light, they glared on him through the dark windows, and far down a vista in the hall. He dropped his knife, his limbs gave way, and, like a branch lopped suddenly from an oak, he sunk down behind the Judge, who spread forth his arms and strove to protect him. It was in vain—all in vain! The good Judge pushed some of the foremost back, he besought them to respect the laws, he shouted to those in the street, entreating them to come up and save

their neighbors from a great crime. But still they closed around him, stern, silent and fierce, with a thirst for blood which no heart present had ever felt till then. They tore the miserable wretch out from behind his protector. They passed him, on a bridge of uplifted hands, to the window, and so out into the open street.

The blacksmith had returned to his work, and the blaze of his forge reddened over the fierce crowd, as it fell in toward his shop, and formed a wall of human beings before it.

"The handkerchief! the handkerchief!" passed from mouth to mouth. Instantly a mass of crimson silk was disentangled from some fragments of the bar, and tossed over the crowd. The red light shone through it as it rose and fell, and a hoarse cry followed its progress.

Oh, the next scene was horrible—I cannot describe it!

* * * * * *

CHAPTER XLII.

THE BLACKSMITH'S SHOP.

When Daniel Hart recovered from the stupor which had fallen upon him, with a conviction that his innocence could no longer be doubted, he was sitting in the midst of the court-room perfectly alone. A noise—a strange, murmuring noise—came surging in through the windows. He arose and staggered a few paces forward, wondering what had become of his children. A crowd of human

beings blocked up the street, dark as death, close to him, but lighted up, on the opposite side, by a fierce ruddy glare. It fell on a platform of stern faces, uplifted, with a sort of savage awe, toward a human form swinging from a post directly before the huge opening cut through the blacksmith-shop instead of a window. Hart cast one look toward the form, framed as it was in the rude opening on a back-ground of fire. He recognized his enemy, shrunk back with a groan, and, covering his face with both hands, shuddered from head to foot.

As Daniel Hart lifted his face again, the stupor that had chained down his faculties gave way, and, for the first time, he comprehended, in its entire force, his deliverance from danger, and the fearful retribution that had overtaken his adversary.

"Stop, neighbors! in the name of God, do not murder him!" he shouted, weaving his great hands convulsively together, and casting another wild look through the window.

There was a hush in the crowd—the terrible reaction of fiercely excited passions. The powerful voice of Daniel Hart, as it shouted the word *murder*, fell like a bolt of cold iron on many a living heart. Murderers! were they murderers?—those stout men, whose lives had hitherto been spent in honest toil! They looked in each other's faces, and each saw the fearful pallor that had fallen on the features of his companion.

Murderers they were—murderers! A moment of passion had made them such. A single act, a single half-hour, and the black blood-stain had fallen upon many a heart which had never known the thought of violence before. Alas! how short a time it takes to fling the one gall-drop of crime into a human soul!

While this appalling silence reigned over the throng, Daniel Hart rushed down the veranda and through the crowd, dashing those who opposed his progress to the right and the left, like a lion in his wrath. He caught hold of an iron in the post where the wretched victim was suspended, sprang up with almost superhuman force, and made a grasp at the handkerchief, in a wild attempt to wrest it from its fastening. He failed, and fell back gasping for breath. He took a knife from his pocket, opened it with his teeth, and, while the glittering blade was still clenched in their fierce hold, sprang into the blacksmith's shop. In an instant he stood in the red light of the window, flung one arm around the body, and cut the handkerchief. The body fell heavily across his shoulder; he dropped the knife, and, springing back, laid it upon the ground.

"Bring brandy—bring brandy!" he exclaimed, tearing the wisp of red silk from the purple and swollen throat.

"If you raly have an idea of bringing the scoundrel to," said the blacksmith, quite coolly, rolling up his sleeve, as he spoke, "a good ducking will do him more good than all the brandy on arth; but the fellow has got over the worst of it, and, to my notion, is about as well off as he ever will be!"

While making this philosophical observation, the smith took a sooty pail from one corner of the shop, and dipping it full of water from a great wooden trough in which he cooled his iron, dashed it over the body. There was no effect; not a quivering muscle, not a single motion, gave the slightest hope of life.

"You may as well give up; he's dead as a door-nail," said the smith, coolly setting down his pail. "You'd better not waste good coneac on the critter, but hand it

round to the chaps outside; they look as if they needed it bad enough, gracious knows."

But all unmindful of his friend's advice, Hart took the measure of brandy which some one had brought from the tavern, placed it by his side on the ground, and laving both hands in it, bathed the livid face, the throat and chest of the wretched being, who had so lately been his bitter enemy. When he saw that it was of no avail, he laid the corpse reverently back on the cinders scattered deep over the earth which formed a floor to the blacksmith's shop, and, covering his face with both hands, groaned aloud.

"Come, there is no use in staying here," said the smith, shaking his friend by the shoulder. "Them poor gals will be rather anxious to see you by this time, I calculate; then there is your brother-in-law a-lying in my spare-room, as weak as a baby. Come along now, do!"

Hart arose, drew a deep breath, and went forth with his friend. The street was yet filled with scattering groups, but they stood away from the sight, and conversed together in low, hoarse whispers. Two by two, and in larger groups, many of them had left the town, while those who had no companions went over to the tavern, and, when the beds were full, stretched themselves on the floor, for no man of all that multitude had courage to pass through the woods alone, after the fearful scene which he had witnessed.

There was that evening a faint star-like glimmer, breaking through the creepers that covered a gable-window of four panes in the blacksmith's dwelling. As Daniel Hart drew near the house, his eyes fell on the light; a glow came stealing to his heart—thoughts of his daughter, her devotion, and the returning happiness ensured to her, were breaking up the horrid sensations that had almost suffo-

cated him. He ascended the rude stairs which led to a chamber in the house, and passing his head up through a trap cut in the floor, stood, with tearful eyes and trembling limbs, gazing on the scene which presented itself in that humble garret-room. Directly opposite lay the languid form of Mr. Bentley; his head was supported by pillows, and the blacksmith's wife was standing over him, with her navarino thrust clear to the back of her head, and armed with a huge camphor-bottle, with which she deluged the moist hair of the invalid, now and then pausing to press her wet hand on the temples of Gillian, who half knelt, half lay upon the bed, with her eyes fixed on those of the wounded man, trembling and crying all the time. Her fingers were twined in the hand of the invalid, and every other moment she lifted her head and closed the fond eyes which gazed so tenderly upon her with kisses, that wandered thence over cheek, forehead, and back to the eyes again, breaking each caress with words of passionate thanksgiving.

When she saw her father, Martha shook the tears from her eyes, and, reaching forth her hand, drew him close up to the bed, pressed his broad palm down on the hand of the invalid, and kissed them both together, murmuring—

"Oh, father! oh, uncle! did you think we should ever be so happy again?"

"Thank God!—oh, thank God, my brother, it was not you that struck me!" said Bentley, feebly grasping the hand which lay against his; "but where is he? what will they do with him?"

"Oh, he is settled for, I reckon," said the smith. "They hung him up, like a dog, before my shop."

"What—what"—the invalid could say no more; his eyes closed, and a shudder ran through his frame.

"Let me—let me!" said Gillian, taking the camphor bottle from the smith's wife, and pressing her cool damp hand tremulously down on the pale forehead of the invalid.

"Well, take it; he seems to like the feel of your hand best, so I may as well go down and take my old man with me—he don't know how to tend on sick folks no more than a wild Injun; yet he's a good-hearted cretur as ever lived, though I do say it that ought not to say it."

The next moment nothing was seen of the blacksmith's wife except her navarino, as it sunk slowly through the trap door, while she cautiously followed her husband down-stairs.

And now they were alone — that united family. Bentley was no longer insensible, for even in his fainting fit there was a happy thrill warming his heart to life again. Notwithstanding all the horrors of the night, that was a blissful meeting; but there was little talking done. What of that? love may be expressed by silence.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AUTHORSHIP.

When people tell us that the chain of human sympathies is limited to propinquity, it is a proof that they have studied little and felt less of those mental phenomena that are fast resolving themselves into a science. There have

been hearts so linked together that intense affection annihilated space, and one suffering soul has imparted its anguish to the twin soul thousands and thousands of miles away. On the morning when Daniel Hart's trial took place in the far West, Hetty Hart awoke with a terrible foreboding of evil which no argument of her sister's could conquer and calm. She lay under her canopy of delicate lace with burning eyes and scarlet cheeks when Mrs. Ransom entered to inquire after her rest.

"I have not slept, Sarah, not one moment, I do believe, through the whole night. If I did seem to be dropping into a doze, something would make me start up and scream for help till my own voice was frightful."

Sarah went up to the bed and laid her hand on the poor woman's forehead, where pain was beating like a pulse.

"But you will sleep now," she said, gently soothing the anguish with her soft palm. "Let me kiss the place and make it well; our mother used to say that, you know, Hetty."

"Our mother, Sarah! ah, me, I have almost forgotten her! Love for him—my own darling son—has driven every thing else out of my life. Our mother was good; but she never dreamed of such mad, aching love as I feel for my child."

"My poor sister," answered Sarah, stooping down and repeating the kiss she had given so kindly, "yours has been a hard life."

"Oh, bitter, bitter as gall and wormwood, Sarah! Think what it was to chain down and hide this great love in my heart, year after year, year after year, when it was draining my life out. I could only see him once in a long, long while, and then he seemed to think it so strange that

I took an interest in him; and when I sat with my poor hands clasped and my lips pressed together, trying so hard to conquer the hungry yearning for one kiss—one little kiss from my own child—he would look at me so indifferently, and once I heard him say, as I went out, 'I wonder what the old maid came for?' It nearly broke my heart, Sarah!"

"But he knows you now, and loves you dearly, I am sure," said Mrs. Ransom, greatly affected; "how could he help it, my poor sister?—for no mother ever suffered as you have."

"Yes, yes, I think he loves me; yet he went away, and I had been ill, worse than you know of—a great deal worse."

"I know that you are ill, Hetty," said Sarah, tenderly.

"Sometimes," added Hetty, and her burning eyes filled with tears, "sometimes it seems to smother me to live in this house. Last night the wind came in through an open window. The curtains fluttered over me like wings, and it seemed as if they wanted to carry me off to him. I got out of bed and tried to come to you, but I am not so very strong, and somehow my limbs gave way, so I crept back again. Then a voice seemed to cry out, warning me of something. Don't smile, Sarah: I know it was the wind moaning through the trees back of the house; but it was so like a human voice, that I answered, 'Yes, son, I would follow you, but God has taken away my strength.'"

"What a terrible night you have spent!" said Mrs. Ransom, suppressing her tears with difficulty. "I hope Michael will yet reward all this love."

"Not Michael, Sarah, but William; the name was his father's, and you shall give him that—nobody shall call him Hurst after this. Our secret has tortured me so

long, that I have no shame left—nothing but love for him and for you, Sarah. I always loved you—always—always."

"Indeed, you did, my poor sister; but try to sleep now. Every thing will seem brighter when you have had a good, long nap," said Mrs. Ransom.

But Hetty only started up in bed and began beating her laced pillows.

"They are hard as rocks," she moaned; "I would rather attempt to sleep on red-hot stones. It's of no use trying to make them easy—nothing can do that; won't you let a little air into the room? but, no, that will set the curtains to fluttering again, and it seems so ghostly."

"Dear Hetty, you are very nervous this morning."

"Am I? Yes, I dare say; but the trouble seems too real for that. I have been nervous all my life, you know; but it did not hold my heart like this. It seems as if something dreadful would happen before to-morrow."

Hetty shuddered among her pillows and clasped her hands in a sort of agony.

"What is it, dear?" said Mrs. Ransom. "There is nothing that should distress you so!"

"There is—there is," she whispered.

Sarah saw how deeply the poor thing was affected, and began to soothe her, as she would have hushed a child out of its nameless grief. She took off the pretty cap and smoothed out the gray hair gathered underneath. Two years before those tresses were only threaded here and there with silver; now they fell upon the pillows white as snow. Sarah sighed heavily as she remarked the mournful change. Hetty lifted her large eyes to her sister's face.

"It was the second sin that did it," she said.

"Forget that, dear; no one else will remember any thing, except that you have loved and suffered."

"You were always kind to me, Sarah, very kind. I thought you dead so long, and then I felt like the morning-glory vines that you and I used to tend when the wind broke down their support; but nothing ever could make me forget you. It is very strange—isn't it? but I was hardly surprised when you came back and took the second load from my conscience. I was so glad to tell the truth. It was like rolling a great stone from my heart. He thought all these silk curtains and lace and soft carpets would make me happy, but I longed—oh, with what aching desire!—for our old chamber overlooking the orchard. It was cruel of Daniel to leave the old house, when I begged and prayed so hard that he would stay. The homestead is empty now, Sarah. The home that you and I loved is desolate as the grave. Neither I nor my boy have a right to any thing. It does seem hard, when his father owned all, and one hour more of life would have made him the heir."

"Hetty," said Sarah, still smoothing the white hair with her hands, "are you sure that William Bentley started for the homestead in order to be married?"

"Am I sure?" cried Hetty, starting up; "am I sure of my life? I tell you, sister, had he lived twenty-four hours I should have been his wedded wife. That very morning I got a letter from him saying so."

"Yes," said Sarah, thoughtfully, "it is hard, but I can answer for Mr. Bentley. He will not only forgive your son, but provide for him as if he were his own."

"Oh, Sarah! why couldn't you have let him marry Gillian? It might be yet, if you would only insist—no one could ever oppose you."

"Hush! do not speak of that again; it is impossible," replied Sarah, in a cold voice that silenced Hetty, but set her to trembling violently.

After a while Sarah spoke on another subject, striving to draw the invalid's mind from her one idea.

"Hetty, you have never told me about our father: how he lived after I came away, and how he died. Was it calmly, as a noble Christian should pass from one world to another?"

"Don't ask me about him, Sarah, please; I was so afraid of my father after that. He was very good, but I crept out of his way till the very sight of him made me tremble, for it seemed to me that sooner or later he must know. But he never did."

"Was he long ill, Hetty?"

"Not a single hour. He had been out in the woodshed for an armful of kindling pine, and was bringing it in when he stumbled at the threshold. Daniel ran forward and caught him in his arms, but he never breathed again."

"Then there was no farewell—no explanation—no blessings?" said Sarah, mournfully.

"Not a word, and I was coward enough to be glad. Had he looked into my face with his dying eyes I should have told every thing."

"Would to heaven you had! How much misery might have been spared us all!"

"Are you blaming me?" said Hetty, in a tone of fretful pain.

"Blaming you, Hetty—did I ever do that?"

"But you think that I ought to have confessed. You are dwelling on the sacrifices you have made. I don't wonder. Still it wasn't like being separated from one's own child."

Sarah smiled a little bitterly but said nothing. In her egotism Hetty had forgotten that the blameless sister had been separated entirely from her only child and the husband she adored, all for her sin.

"That will do," said the sick woman at last, withdrawing her head from that sisterly hand. "Just go out now, please, and perhaps I shall get a little sleep."

Sarah went out, hoping that the suffering woman would indeed sleep. But all that morning Hetty continued to sit up in bed and moan out the unaccountable distress that had seized upon her.

"I know that he is sick, suffering, struggling with his enemies," she would moan. "They are hunting him down, wounding him. Wolves, gaunt, horrible wolves lie in wait for him; still, but ah, how hungry! I can feel them creeping along the earth, dragging themselves on the ground, whimpering with impatience. I will go to him. He is my son, mine, mine! I am not ashamed to own it. The secret was rolled from my heart long ago."

These strange fancies would seize upon her at times with more or less violence, but she slept a little during the day, and once or twice Sarah found her resting in comparative quiet when she stole softly into the sick chamber.

Toward evening she grew worse. The fever raged hot and high in her veins; her wild eyes grew dazzling, her burning hands were forever clutching each other and tearing themselves apart with restless action.

Darkness crept over the city, black darkness in which the sultry air seemed stagnant. Then the fever burning in that frail form flamed up, leaving her thin cheeks scarlet, and her lips dry as dead flowers.

An hour after dark the anguish that seized upon her

was terrible. She sat up in bed doing fierce battle with the pillows and tearing at the curtains. Low cries issued from her lips. She made wild efforts to leave her bed and flee away, crying out that she was pursued—that thousands of wolves lay crouching in the bushes ready to seize upon her. Then she uttered a succession of terrible shrieks, which ended in choking groans; her hands flew upward to her throat, tearing some imaginary thing away. The groans grew fainter and fainter, and with them came gushes of warm, red blood. It was this that strangled her. She could not breathe through the scarlet torrent.

At eight o'clock Mehitable Hart died. That very night and hour her son was hanging in the red illumination of the blacksmith's window, hundreds of miles away.

Sarah Bentley went with her sister's remains into Rockland county, and laid them to rest in the same ground with her father, praying that she might have found the good old man in the presence of that Divine Being who forgives so much to his feeble creatures. Out of the desolate old homestead they carried that erring one: through the orchard where she had gathered early summer-apples, and across the meadow where the sisters had made dandelion chains when little children, along the path which Sarah had trod so often in a brave effort to save that silent one, they bare the coffin along. There was no mourner but Sarah—not even a farm servant, to honor his old mistress; all had been scattered by her secret sin, yet old neighbors bore her to the grave with solemn respect, and lifted their hats reverently when the coffin passed. A little way from the family burying-spot was a solitary grave. The grass had grown rank over it, and a ponderous monument of marble marked it as the resting-place of some wealthy man. Not by her father, but here, close by

the grave of William Bentley, they laid his frail love down to sleep, and on the pure marble of his monument a record was cut which the angels must have forgiven that noble sister for placing there—a record which told the world that Mehitable, relict of Wllliam Bentley, lay by his side.

As Sarah returned to the homestead where some of the old furniture remained, a man came forth to meet her. He had been walking up and down the porch, waiting anxiously for her return. Sarah held forth her hand, smiling a sad welcome.

"Woodworth," she said, "my dear, dear friend, God has sent you to me in my utter loneliness!"

"I have been away in the South, hoping by travel to wear out the time which lies between me and my bride," he said, speaking low in respect to her sad mood. "They told me at the house that you had come up here on a mournful errand, and I followed you."

"Yes," said Sarah, with quivering lips, and eyes full of tears, "this is a sad day for me."

Woodworth looked upon her in astonishment. He knew her character well, and was not surprised that she should feel the death of any human being keenly; but there was a depth and poignancy of sorrow here that troubled him.

"Why do you mourn this lady so deeply?" he said. "She did not strike me as a person calculated to draw forth such regret. Ah, my friend, will you never learn to suffer less for others?"

"Hush," answered Sarah, gently; "Mehitable Hart was my sister, my only and dear sister."

"Mrs. Ransom!"

"That is not my name, Woodworth, though one that I hope has not been dishonored in my keeping. I am Sarah Bentley, the mother of Gillian."

He grasped both her hands in his, speechless with the joy of this surprise.

"What! you—you—her mother and mine!"

"Her mother, certainly, and yours if you care to call me so," was the gentle answer.

"I always felt that you were destined to be something to me," he cried; "but this is beyond belief—and Gillian knows it?"

"Not yet. They had left New York before I arrived, but I have sent a messenger to tell them."

"A messenger: what messenger?"

"Young Bentley, the person we knew as Michael Hurst."

"Oh, Mrs. Ransom—I beg your pardon—Mrs. Bentley, will you never learn prudence? Why did you send this false man on an errand so delicate?"

Sarah shook her head in mild disapproval. "Suspicious as ever," she said, "always seeing the dark side of a character, like a true lawyer."

"But I tell you this young man is treacherous; I very much doubt if he had any claim whatever to your husband's estate."

"I know that he had none," answered Sarah, tranquilly, "but the temptation was great, and the laws harsh in visiting a parent's sin on his offspring."

"But you admit that this young man perpetrated a great fraud against your husband: how then can you trust him? He will surely betray you."

"I do not think so badly of human nature," answered Sarah, with a grave smile. "I have been his best friend."

"So much the more reason why a man like that will turn upon you."

"Oh, cynic and unbeliever."

"I wish it were possible to instil some of my distrust into your nature, my sweet friend," said Woodworth, smiling in spite of himself; "but come in, if this empty old house affords a spot where we can converse comfortably. I am all curiosity to hear the particulars of this life-romance."

Sarah opened the front door and entered the sitting-room. Some kind neighbor had built a fire on the hearth and dusted the old-fashioned couch and chairs. The two friends sat down on the couch, and, with her hands in Woodworth's, Sarah told him all. "He is my daughter's betrothed," she said inly, "and in our household we will hereafter have no secrets."

"And so this is the way in which your author's life commenced?" said Woodworth, reverently pressing the hands in his.

Sarah smiled through her tears, for a sort of self-pity had seized upon her while telling of her early trials, and she wept more than once like a child.

"Yes, we tried to earn something by needle-work—sister Hetty and I—but what can a poor woman do with her needle? I had always been writing little sketches and scraps of poetry, only to hide them away under the shingles of the garret. It was a thing I could not help and was afraid to speak of; for my father was a very religious man, and looked upon the parables almost as an unauthorized interpolation of the Scriptures. I had many bright, high thoughts in those days, which would not die out unexpressed. I did not know what all this meant at the time, for these thoughts came before I had a full knowledge of the method whereby books were created. But I never heard a hymn out of measure in church without an impulse to supply the missing cadence, and

would wander off from the dry books in my father's little stock to think how much more beautiful they might be made.

"When my sister's troubles came, and the need of money for the support of her child pressed upon us, it broke on me like an inspiration, one night, that God had given me some gifts by which my sister's child might be kept from perishing, and her good name saved. I got up in the night. We were on Long Island, and poor Hetty had her baby with her for a day or two: he was ill and troublesome, but we thought it a great blessing even to hear him cry. I took the boy from his sleeping mother's bosom, and carried him up and down the room, framing my first real poem as I walked, and kissing his warm cheek between the pauses. It was an exciting subject. There had been a revolution beyond sea, and tyranny had crushed it down. I imagined the condition of a mother and her son, when the husband and father was brought home dead—no matter about the rest. I had a great object, and a theme which made every pulse in my heart thrill with patriotism. I wonder the loud beating of my heart did not frighten the babe: on the contrary, the heave and fall of my bosom seemed to rock him into a sweet slumber. Hetty slept on, with her hands clasped and a smile on her lips, evidently dreaming that the boy was in her arms yet.

"When the poem was finished—for I did not write a line till the next day—I lifted the boy up and gave him a thrilling kiss of joy. 'It is good,' I said. 'It is poetry, I know—such poetry as thrills the public heart, or it could not have left so much fire in mine.'

"I spoke aloud in my exultation. The boy awoke, and smiled upon me. I clasped him close, raining kisses on

his face; I must have kissed something, then, or burst into tears.

"'We will find a way of earning bread for you yet, my little fellow,' I said; 'wait a while, and, God willing, we will give you an education that shall be better than gold.'

"The boy smiled and beat the air with his tiny hands, as if to say, 'Only give me the means, and I'll show you how a youngster can cut his own path through the world.'

"It was a singular confidence—that which I bestowed on the baby that night; but his bright eyes gave me inspiration, and I whispered a thousand silly hopes to him, as I walked the chamber, clasping him close to my bosom. After a while I took him to bed, and then a reaction came over me, as I reviewed the poem I had written only in my mind; it grew tame and commonplace: my brains went vigorously to work making changes, and the daylight found me worn out and disappointed with the whole.

"The next day I went to the city. Up to this time I had never mentioned the idea of my life to any human being. I neither knew an author or publisher in the world; but I had read good books, and knew that the men and women who wrote many of them must be living. One man, the author of some novels of great power and originality, which had made themselves known abroad, as well as at home, I had seen. His brilliant lecture before some literary society had thrilled my whole being in the listening. I had never spoken to this man in my life; but he was the first author I had ever seen face to face, and he seemed like an old acquaintance, long before the lecture closed. I knew where this man lived, and went to his house with my manuscript poem written out. 'He is a poet and a great man,' I said, 'and such people must

love to aid those who cannot help following after them' So I went to his house less timidly than you may suppose. He sat in his study writing, when I entered; he was engaged on some law paper, I think, for he was a hard-working man, and tamed his genius down to many a severe, dry study.

"This man scarcely seemed surprised at seeing me, but rose from his seat and came forward with a bright, cordial smile on one of the finest faces I ever saw.

"I scarcely remember what I said, or how that poem got into his hand; but we sat down by his desk together, and he read it carefully. A smile beamed all over his face more than once. Then he would shake his head, and two lines which ran down between his brows drew close together, and I felt that there was some fault of sentiment or rhythm which jarred on his fine senses. But the predominating expression, and I read every change keenly, was one of surprise and pleasure.

"'Well,' he said, laying down the paper, 'how many of these things have you written?'

"'Only this,' I answered.

"'And what can I do for you, my child?' he resumed, with a smile that made my heart leap.

"'Tell me if it is good for any thing.'

"'Good for any thing! Yes, child, it is good for a great deal.'

"'And I need not be ashamed to offer it to some paper or magazine?'

"'With half an hour's polishing, I should not be ashamed to offer it as my own.'

"I burst into tears. Till that moment I had not understood how intense was the anxiety that brought me there.

"'But how can I make it more worthy?' I inquired, ashamed of this outburst, and trying to laugh. 'It seemed easy enough in the night, when the whole thing first came to me; but this morning I felt that it was very imperfect, but could not tell where or why.'

"'I dare say,' he answered, laughing. 'Poets do not leap into perfection at a single bound. Genius is but a species of madness, without study, perseverance, industry, and a great deal of common-sense.'

"'I am industrious,' was my answer; 'and if you say that there is hope for me I will persevere; for I have a great object to attain.'

"'Indeed? And so young!'

"He uttered these words half as an exclamation and half as a question. I felt the color flash into my face, but said nothing in reply. He had compassion on my embarrassment; and, taking up a pencil, began to mark the faults in my poem. I watched him with hushed breath, and with every dash of the pencil my heart went down heavily. He looked up from the paper and saw that I was growing pale.

"'It is a beautiful poem, a noble poem,' he said, 'and should have no imperfections.'

"Again my eyes filled with tears. I could have knelt down and worshipped that man for his kindness; yet he was a severe critic, and dealt with me as a father teaches the child he desires to improve.

"'There,' he said, giving the paper into my hands again, 'I have marked the faults—you must remedy them; but let me explain.'

"He went over the poem line by line, told me where I was wrong—that this word jarred with another far away, making discord to a sensitive ear. But the subject, the

soul and spirit, he did not attempt to disturb. 'That was the rich, rough gold,' he said, 'which industry and taste formed into shapes of beauty.'

"This liberal praise neutralized the humiliation of those pencil-marks. He was so genial, so earnest in his attempts to lead me safely into the path of letters, that I was constantly forgetting that an hour before we had been strangers.

"When the poem had been sufficiently scrutinized, he pleasantly turned the conversation on myself. In my earnestness of purpose I had forgotten even to give him my name. Now, I told him frankly all about my life in the country, the scraps of verse that lay hidden under the old rafters of the homestead, and of my grand old father, with his stern sense of right, his clear judgment and indomitable pride.

"My author was a New England man, and he understood this character well. He seemed to be delighted with the fresh feelings that I had brought in from my country-life, and we became fast friends from that pleasant hour. When I left him, there was not a passage in my life that he did not know, except the painful secret which lay between me and my sister. That was not mine to reveal, and in my innermost soul I had sworn to keep it from all mortal knowledge.

"As I was going out, my new friend said to me, in his prompt, impetuous way, 'Wait a moment; I had forgotten; you will want to publish that.'

"'Yes,' I faltered; 'it is important.'

"'Do you know any publisher?'

"'No, I am a stranger here.'

"'Stop, I will give you a letter to one who has some faith in my judgment. Take the poem to him—that is

when you have completed it; but be careful about the proofs.'

"'The proofs!' I repeated, in utter bewilderment, for I knew no more about the process of printing than a child.

"He laughed again, and commenced walking up and down the room, jingling a bunch of keys in his hands, delighted as a child at having found any thing so ridiculously unsophisticated.

"'Well, well, child, when they send you some long strips of thin paper with your poem printed on it, come to me and I will teach you to correct it. The whole thing is simple enough when you know how. But send the proof to me—send it to me!'

"I was distressed by the thought of claiming such help from a man of his position, and said so.

"'My child,' he answered, with gentle seriousness, 'God's creatures are intended to help each other. Some of these days you will be doing the same thing.'

"I laughed at the absurd idea. The greatest wish I had at the moment was to win a support for my sister's child. Thoughts of fame or greatness had never yet entered my mind; and I doubt very much if lasting power ever came out of efforts which find their root in mere selfish ambition.

"I went home with a sweet hope at my heart, and spent that day in finishing up my poem. It was wonderful how that one lesson had enkindled my mind. It seized upon the suggestions in those pencil-marks, and turned them into ideas that made my soul glow. When it was finished, the poem seemed like a new creation to me. I began to love it again.

"The next day, early, I went to the publisher of a magazine with my note of introduction. Fortunately he

happened to be disengaged, and seeing, perhaps, the keen anxiety in my face, read the manuscript at once. Oh, how my heart beat as he unfolded the paper! I watched his eyes as they fell from line to line, but could read nothing there. He folded the paper, seemed to think a moment, then thrust it into a pigeon-hole in his desk, took a key from his pocket, and opened a drawer.

"'If this will be satisfactory,' he said, without a word of comment, 'I shall be pleased to hear from you again.'

"I took the bank notes that he held toward me with strange feelings of mingled exultation and humility—exultation that one effort of my pen had achieved so much; shame that I could take money for a God-gifted talent. But the publisher neither saw the trembling of my limbs or the burning of my cheek. To him our interview was ended, and he began to search among his papers with the constraint of a person who wished to be alone. I wanted to thank him for the great joy he had given me, but he grew more and more intent on his papers, and nodded at them rather than me when I left the room.

"When I reached home and found myself quite alone in my chamber, I glanced at the money; then unfolded it, and was frightened at the amount. It was not much, as we value these things now, but I must have worked a month at my needle—nay, two months—for the notes that fluttered in my hand. Still I looked at them shyly, and hid them away about my person like a thief. It was impossible to convince myself that they were honestly mine, that I had not been receiving an abject charity, or, worse yet, practising some fraud on the deluded publisher. But the money was there, and for some weeks, at least, that unfortunate child, thrice loved because of the pity which came with him had been provided for. That

relief was a blessing which made itself felt through my whole being.

"I did not tell Hetty how the money had been earned; but she knew that I possessed it; and we went for help and counsel to Mr. Frost, a blessed old minister of the gospel, whose life was spent in such deeds as make angels brighten with beautiful hopes of humanity. He gave both. A good nurse was found for the child, and we went home to Rockland county, carrying our secret burden into the old homestead. I had made arrangements with the publisher, through my noble friend, and contributed little sketches and poems for his magazine every month. But Hetty worked on with her needle industriously as ever, and with every package of manuscript we sent down parcels of fine needle-work, which the poor soul spent half her nights in getting ready for the fancy-stores. I would have prevented this, but she took pathetic pleasure in her toil, and grew almost jealous that I should have the power of contributing more money toward her child's support than she was capable of earning. This was the beginning of my real life. I was not content with scribbling light things now and then, but studied hard and toiled over my productions when the passion of composition was over; copying, recopying, condensing, and elaborating them, till they soon won a place among the favored contributions of the magazine I wrote for. My noble friend had taught me that authorship was no holiday work, and that pink and blue ribbons did not often tie up the best manuscript. I felt then, and I feel more intensely now, that a profession which has its groundwork in immortal thought should not be undertaken lightly; that fame, when it ennobles womanhood, should, like sacred incense, float only over the pure of purpose

and the strong of soul. To create is to be grand. The priest who proves false to his religion is less unworthy than the woman who, being an author, degrades the dignity of her sex, or the glory of pure thought."

Sarah Ransom spoke rapidly and with the force of deep feeling, for she knew well that her auditor gave a noble sympathy to every word she uttered, and put no restraint upon the enthusiasm that kindled her face and lighted her eyes like an outburst of sunshine. It was not often that this woman gave out so much of the life which was within her; she was in many respects a woman of the world, and understood the public level too well for much exhibition of feeling except with her most intimate friends. As the true Christian feels reluctant to drag that which is most sacred to him into public comment, she seldom unvailed the thoughts that broke from her now. But as the memories of her life rose more and more vividly before her, she spoke without hesitation, feeling how completely the man who listened understood her. Woodworth said little; her narrative interested him deeply, and he was reluctant to turn its course even by a word.

She looked at him with her kindling eyes, that had grown almost black within the hour.

"Have I been talking too ardently, my friend? Is this egotism?"

"It is the truth, and I love to hear it. Go on."

"Where was I?" she said. "Oh, I remember."

The light went slowly out from her face, a tearful sound stole up through her voice.

"Then my husband came. We loved each other. I can say no more than that—we loved each other and were married. He was a noble man, Woodworth, proud, sensitive, exacting sometimes, but still truly noble. I

married him with that burden on my soul. But for that—oh, but for that cruel, cruel secret our happiness would have been perfect. It was almost so for a while, for the power of my love was so great that it overwhelmed every thing. I could look up to this man with proud reverence. I was neither ashamed nor afraid when my love grew into worship. I was sometimes haughty with other men, and liked to feel my own superiority; but with him, the best gifts I possessed seemed too commonplace for attention. I was ambitious for him, never for myself. I wanted the whole world to acknowledge his perfections as I did. Such love is only felt once in a lifetime; it can neither change nor die, but must live forever, a joy or a pain. When it turned to pain with us the agony was worse than death."

Here the noble woman paused: her face had became white as snow; there was a shiver of pain in her voice. The hand that she laid on Woodworth's was cold.

"I cannot dwell on this. In the very midst of our happiness, when I was a mother, and we both worshipped the new soul born to us, he discovered the existence of *that* child, and traced out the chain of events which seemed to fasten the disgrace of its life on me. My heart had never dreamed how proud it was till this charge was made by *his* lips. It swallowed up every other feeling and refused even an attempt at explanation. I was mad with the anguish of this undeserved shame. 'He should have known me better,' I cried, in the stillness of my solitary room. I would have blinded my own eyes rather than believe them, if they saw evil in him. Yet he condemns me even at the first word. What if he did see that wretched child in my arms—on my bosom—with its lips to mine, and its hands in my hair, crowing and laugh-

ing at the sight of me? What if I had, long ago, in my girlhood, sold needlework at the shops to support it, and had, since our marriage, used some of the money he lavished on me so lovingly when I was too happy for writing? Was that a reason why he should fix these loathsome suspicions on his wife?

"These were the thoughts that wounded me for many a long, dreary night. But no explanation was made. I could give none without casting the burden, that I was strong enough to bear, on my poor sister, who would have been crushed into the grave by it. I had promised, and I kept my promise the more resolutely because I would have trusted him, or, if not that, forgiven him without explanation.

"Sometimes the anguish of our nearness, and yet complete sunderance, was so terrible that I faltered; but one thought of my old father, with his puritanical pride, gave back my firmness, and I learned 'to suffer and grow strong.'

"The torture of this life lasted till we had dragged our misery beyond seas, out of the reach of scandal. At Naples we separated finally. Our child was placed in a convent. He went eastward to the Holy Land. I was left alone."

Mrs. Ransom struggled with the tears that had completely stopped her voice, and spoke again.

"Forgive me, but sometimes I cannot help giving way to this self-pity," she said, attempting to smile, but failing mournfully. "I was very ill then for a long time. Oh, my friend, my friend, it is not the hearts that break which suffer most! I got better at last, and began to creep out into the open air on cloudy days—the sunshine seemed to wound me. One day, a woman who seemed above the common beggars, came up to me and in her sympathetic

language entreated a little money to buy food with. I took a piece of silver from my purse and gave it to her. She looked at the coin and at me; her fine eyes shone with sudden tears; she pressed kisses on my hand. In my whole life I had never witnessed so sudden an exhibition of joy.

"The coin I had given this woman only possessed the value of five shillings, but it had made her happy. I stood watching her, as she disappeared down a side-street, with envy. What on earth would ever make me happy again?

"As I walked on, a thought came to me, born of this incident. It said: 'While you have the power to make others happy with so little effort, what right have you to give up all as lost?'

"I went home to my apartments filled with new vigor. Hitherto my life in Naples had been isolated. I had been too selfishly wretched for any thought of doing good to others. As I went up-stairs, a woman, that I had often seen about the house, met me. Her eyes were flushed; she had been weeping, and looked at me wistfully, as if afraid to speak out something that troubled her mind.

"I stopped at once, and inquired what I could do for her.

"'Oh, Signora!' she said, 'it is not for myself that I grieve, but the poor lady overhead; she is dying—ah, so miserably!'

"'Show me where to find her,' I said; 'I, too, have been ill, but God will give me strength to reach this sister sorrow.'

"She led me into a small chamber in the top of the house, and there I found a young woman, about my own age, in the last stages of a rapid consumption. She had

been very beautiful; but now the mere wreck of her loveliness filled me with painful sympathy.

"This woman told me her history, but it would only revive an old distress to repeat it. She was an American—the wife of an artist who had fallen in love with her beauty, taken her from her country-home directly abroad, and, burying himself in his studies, left her in the most dangerous society on earth to make her way as she pleased. It ended, as such neglect of the young and thoughtless sometimes will, in utter ruin. After a year or two she wandered off to Naples and lay dying there.

"This wretched woman was young and in distress, therefore worthy of compassion. She had been very sinful, and for this reason was in greater need of compassion. How much more terrible her suffering than mine, I thought. Blessed with a consciousness of innocence, what right have I to droop, while she is dying with the vulture of guilt gnawing at her heart? Pity for this poor soul reconciled me to life. I grew strong in supporting her weakness—hopeful, while showing her how beautiful eternity might be. She died, and we buried her in the *Campo Sante.* They asked for her name, and I gave them mine.

"From that day I took the name of Julia Ransom, left Naples, and went into one of those small inland towns that seem to have crept out of the middle ages, merely to make a lovely landscape picturesque.

"In this town I remained a year, and then, for the first time since my unhappy marriage, I began to feel a strong desire to write, not the imperfect sketches that had been my best efforts hitherto, but something in which a soul grown strong in suffering might pour itself out with the power and force of experience. There arose also a neces-

sity that I should make some effort for my own support. There was still a little fund in America for the child, but that would be exhausted in time, and I must think of providing more. Just at this period I received a letter from Mr. Frost. His health was failing, it said, and he had found another person to look after the interests of my little charge when he was gone. The good man spoke of death as if it had been some pleasant journey which he intended to take. It was the last letter I ever received from him.

"Well, I commenced the book. At first, when my efforts sprang entirely from the imagination, writing had been a passion with me; but now habits of thought and bitter experience were converting them into a power. By this time I understood the Italian language well. I found a resting-place in one of those pretty hamlets which lay in the hills, near the convent where my daughter lived. My heart so yearned for a look at her now and then that I disguised myself as a sister of charity, and, during the months that I stayed in the neighborhood, saw her at least every week. But this indulgence broke up my life with such feverish tenderness, and became so painful in its restraints, that I felt myself growing feeble and weak under it. One day I went to the convent, took the little one in my arms, kissed her with silent blessings, and went away, resolved to give her up rather than feed my soul on the husks of concealed affection. In my whole life I had never parted with her more quietly; but the aching heaviness of my heart has not passed away from that hour to this.

"I went to England and made double negotiations for publication of my book in that country and in my own. How successful it was in both nations, I need not say.

But it was the work, the absorbing occupation that lifted me out of my own unhappy life, which I cared for most. If some little fame was the result I scarcely knew it, or desired that others should know it.

"At last I came back to America, a lonely woman, but not altogether unhappy; for out of my life came many sweet duties, and exertion brought its own reward. My father was dead—a stranger told me this, when I asked if he knew the old man. Daniel had lost the young wife he had married in our happier days, and my sister kept house for him in the old homestead. They had no need of me—I was dead to them and all the world—dead and buried in that blooming hill-side back of Naples.

"It was at this period that I became acquainted with you, my friend. Time and sorrow had changed me so much that I was safe from discovery, even in the city where I had formerly lived. I bought the little cottage, and settled down into the quiet life you know of. My sister's child had become a bright, intelligent youth. I was his only friend, and he seemed to give back something like regard for the benefits I had conferred upon him. His life in college was marked with singular devotion to his studies, and a reckless expenditure of money which alarmed me; but his explanations, if not satisfactory, were always so plausible that, knowing his unhappy position, I had no heart to inquire too closely into the truth of his statements.

"But the quiet of my life was broken up suddenly and forever. Scarcely had I got Michael established in a mercantile house, and seen him honorably started in his career, when I was surprised by the news that my husband and daughter had arrived in America. My first impulse was to break up the little home, which had been my

safe resting-place for so many years, and flee into foreign parts again; but a wild desire to know something of these beloved ones—to look on his face once more, and hear the voice of my child—was too urgent; at any risk, I determined to wait, for a strong conviction seized upon me that our separation would not prove forever. Perhaps, now that our father was gone, Hetty might, of her own free will, take the secret burden from my life.

"I waited, and the good God sent Gillian, our bright, glorious child, into my very arms. She loved me at first sight, and I—great heavens! it seemed as if this heart would break under the swell of its joy, when she lay for the first time on my bosom: all the hushed love of many years rose up and surrounded her with its richness. I was jealous of every look she cast on another. The very tones of her voice seemed too precious for any ear but mine. I was greedy of every word she spoke, of her very glances, as they fell through the window; it seemed as if nature itself were robbing me.

"She told me of her father—my husband, remember—how he had mourned and how he had suffered. I recognized it all, and the great love that had lain buried under my dreary life so long broke forth with a vividness that no will could resist. All that was strong or grand in my nature swelled up with it, leaving the paltry pride, which had perhaps separated us more than any thing else, like drift-wood hurled away by the torrent.

"You remember the ball which marked Gillian's coming out; how I hesitated, evaded, relented, and at last appeared there. Woodworth, when I met my husband in the library of that house it was the first time in almost fifteen years. Is it a wonder that I fainted? Is it strange that I was beside myself that night—that I followed him into

his private study, and finding him struck senseless there, held him for one moment against a heart that had never ceased to worship him?

"But I had seen my sister. At first it was with a vague hope of pleading with her, but she was so frail, so weak in every way that I gave the thought up in despair. So that one embrace was only a farewell. I could not live in the same city, nay, on the same continent with him and keep silence. The agony of that one night warned me of this, and once more I fled."

Mrs. Ransom ceased speaking; there was nothing more to tell of which Woodworth was not already informed. She did not give her reasons for returning so unexpectedly, for, even then, tender forbearance for her sister's child kept all expressions of blame from her lips. She wished to see right done, but not in vengeance.

"And you have suffered so much, my friend," said Woodworth, filled with wondering sympathy; "so much, and even I never guessed it."

"Why should you?" she said, smiling sadly. "Prayers and sorrow lie between the heart and its God."

"But you seemed cheerful," said Woodworth.

"And I was so. Why not? My life was full of blessings. God withheld nothing from me but human love."

"True; but that is like withdrawing sunshine from the earth."

She smiled radiantly in answering, "But I have the sunshine now; a few weeks and all the bloom of my life will come back. It is here now, for I know in my soul that he loves me yet."

Sarah grew beautiful as she spoke; the fire-light flamed up and revealed the brooding joy in her eyes—deeper and holier joy than ever shone up from the soul of a young girl.

"Gillian, my child, loves you," she said, folding two white hands over her knee and falling into a dreamy posture. "Such love is fresh and beautiful. It reminds me of apple-blossoms when they first give their perfume out. Some men fear that this bright dawn of the heart will fade away, leaving only the commonplace behind. But I tell you, Woodworth, that after-love, the fruit which swells out from the blossom, still keeping its shadow at the core, is worth a thousand worlds of this evanescent freshness. Love has its phases like all human passions; the sacred richness of its repose is enough for me."

"And shall be enough for your friend, when the time comes; but I should not care to leap over the blossom season," said Woodworth, coloring pleasantly in the fire-light.

"Now," answered Sarah, rising out of her dreamy state, "let us talk of the future. What are your plans?"

"The first," replied Woodworth, cheerfully, "is to find my lost lady-love, and ask that as little time as possible shall separate us from the parson's blessing. The time of my probation is up, thank heaven!"

"I will go with you," said Sarah, gently; "now that she is asleep down yonder, there is nothing to delay us."

"It will be a hard journey, dear lady, and you are worn out with watching."

"I am used to hard journeys," she said; "and as for weariness, there will be no rest for me till I have seen them."

"Then let us start in the morning."

"I will be ready," she answered. "Now, farewell, till then."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE REUNION.

Once more that double log-cabin gave signs of active life. Dinah and Liz—now a pretty colored girl—had left The Bend, where they had followed those two seemingly orphaned girls, and in a marvellously short time placed the old home in a comfortable state of preparation.

John Downs had been miserable during the trial, but now he came out in great spirits, and the wild turkies, prairie chickens, quails, and delicate little birds that he brought into Dinah's kitchen were enough to feast a whole township. The happiness of that young man was something beautiful to behold, when he lifted Mr. Bentley out of the wagon which had brought him from The Bend, and half carried him into the best sleeping-room, which the girls had arranged for his reception.

John knew that his wedding-day was near at hand. No horrible murder or heart-rending trial could come again between him and his happiness, for the cruel power which had worked so much evil in that family was swept away as it were by a whirlwind.

With deep and solemn thanksgiving the family once more returned to the shelter of that humble roof, scarcely thinking as yet that the wild impulse of a mob had restored them to wealth and position again. The good God had been directly merciful in saving Daniel Hart's life. By his own crime young Hurst had fallen. The

shock of his horrible death was still too great for actual rejoicing among the persons he had so deeply wronged. So with quiet thoughtfulness they settled down into their humble life again.

Daniel Hart seemed to have grown stronger and more genial from his trial. He went back on the very first day to the clearing, and after grinding his axe, levelled the dying chestnut to the earth, with blows that made the forest reverberate once more.

Gillian, too, restored to her father, and saved from the terrible anguish that had almost killed her, became hopeful again, as youth will, and began to wonder in her heart why Woodworth had kept so long silent. It was now time that he should come West and claim her for his wife —full time. In her trouble she had scarcely thought of this, but now that the great sorrow was lifted from her life she grew anxious. As for Martha, what with visits from her lover in the morning, excuses for coming with game at night, and chance interviews every hour or two, she managed to take life with considerable cheerfulness.

But Dinah! her works in the kitchen were something wonderful. She wasn't going to have a dispensation of providence, that seemed more than a miracle, passed over without becoming festivities. The day that Mr. Bentley returned home—a little weak, but looking well and happier than he had been for years—Dinah burst forth into a storm of preparation. Pine knots and kindling wood were collected in armsful. From morning till night great sheets of flame roared up the chimney and flashed into the cool October air, melting away in clouds of curling smoke. Kettles of scalding water covered the windows with drops of steam; a basket of moist feathers

stood by the door; and in front of the huge fire two fine turkeys and a regiment of smaller birds whirled and browned on the twine strings which suspended them from a beam in the ceiling, dropping streams of luscious gravy into an encampment of dripping pans and tin basins that formed a half moon on the hearth.

"Now mind you tend 'em faithful," said Dinah to Liz; "keep the big spoon a-goin' on them turkeys; dip up the gravy and give 'em back as good as dey send—'tend to yer duty, and they'll be scrumptuous eatin', now I tells yer; and mind keep der door shut close. I don't want de folks ter know what's goin on till de 'past am spread, and thanksgivin' on de table."

Liz promised, and went down on her knees behind the largest turkey, bathing him with his own gravy till the scent was carried off in luscious gushes up the chimney.

"Them 'um!" cried Dinah, in great glee, "nebber mind de fire, Lib; here am a turkey's wing to hold 'tween yer and it—'sides, heat don't tan a nigger, nohow. Jes keep it a gwoin while I run in and set de table. Bless de Lord, what am dat?"

Liz sprang from her hot place by the fire and ran to the door, fanning herself with the turkey's wing.

"Oh, ki! ki! if it isn't a city gemman in a buggy, and Squire Church's hoss with a lady, and—golly, but I'll run tell Miss Gillian!"

"No, yer wont!" cried Dinah, seizing the girl in her first leap. "Dem am sacrum t'ings, Liz, sich as young niggers mustn't hab nothin' to do wid. It's her beau. I'll compare Miss Gillian for de ferlicitation as am before her; 'tend ter yer turkeys, chile—'tend ter yer turkeys!"

Dinah was too late. Gillian and Martha were just coming in from the clearing with a quantity of golden rod

and wild asters, which they had been gathering for Mr. Bentley's room. The woods were now all a-blaze with gorgeous October foliage: so they had added some of the most richly-tinted leaves to the late blossoms, and Martha held a quantity of wild grapes gathered up in her apron.

Gillian dropped the flowers and uttered a cry of delight as she saw Woodworth spring from the buggy, lift the lady out and resign her to the care of Daniel Hart—all as it seemed in an instant. The next, he was coming toward her, so bright, so joyous in his eager haste, that she almost ran to meet him. As their hands clasped and their happy smiles mingled, Martha stole away and entered the cabin. There she found Daniel Hart on his knees, trembling from head to foot with a great burst of emotion. His face was buried in his broad hands, and a prayer which was almost a shout of joy broke from him—

"Oh, my God, how can I be thankful enough? It is her, it is her!"

"Father, father, what is the matter? What has happened?" said Martha, bending over the old man.

Daniel Hart lifted his head. His face quivered under a rain of tears. The voice burst almost in a shout from his lips.

"Oh, girl, it is my sister Sarah! it is my sister Sarah! She was lost and is found; she was dead and is alive again."

It was true. Julia Ransom—never to be called by that name again—had entered the room where her husband was sitting alone. His journey from The Bend had wearied him a little, and he lay back in his chair with closed eyes. She stole toward him with the breath checked on her lips—her face bright and glorified with joy, her step noiseless. He heard the flutter of her garments, but the

window was open, and he thought, in his half-sleep, that it was a gush of air stirring the ripe autumnal foliage of a tree that sheltered the house. She was close by him; her head drooped like a flower weighed down by its own perfume. Her lips fell to his, mingling sighs with his breath. The touch was light as the flutter of a rose-leaf; but it sent a thrill through his dreams, and he started up, looking eagerly around.

She was before him, her eyes full of tears, looking into his—her hands clasped as if to beg pardon for the breath she had left on his lips. The light was dim, thus mellowing the traces of age. It was the Sarah Hart he had loved—the wife he had abandoned—the mother of Gillian.

He opened his arms, and held them forth.

"Sarah! my wife!"

His voice thrilled the very air of the room; it brought her within the clasp of his arms, close, close to his heart. Twenty years of sorrow—what was it, balanced by a moment like that?

They sat together in the little room, almost silent; but now and then a broken word explained a little of the past.

"And you can forgive my suspicion—my stubborn cruelty?" he said.

"No, no. The evidence was so strong—my pride so uncontrollable: the fault rested there, my husband. But I had taken an oath, before my God, never to betray Hetty's secret—to guard the good name of our family with my life. But for this compact I should have told you all."

"Oh, Sarah, the truth was late in coming!"

She took his hand between both hers, and kissed it, half timidly; for a touch of her old pride made her expect,

rather than offer demonstrations of the deep, deep love that rose in her heart.

That moment the door opened, and Gillian appeared, searching for her father. She saw the lady by his side, and came eagerly forward. Woodworth had told her nothing—deeming the secret too sacred for any but a parent's lips.

"Oh, Mrs. Ransom!"

"Gillian, it is your mother."

The young girl stood for a moment, mute as stone; then her color came, her heart heaved, and the joyful weeping of those noble women filled the room.

"My mother—how sweetly the word sounds!" said Gillian. "Oh, how long we have thought you dead, my mother!"

"It was another's death of which I took advantage. An American woman died at Naples just before I left that city. She was an unfortunate creature who had strayed away from her position in life and died of a broken heart. By design my name got mingled with hers. They laid her in the *Campo Sante*, and there my old life closed. I made for myself a new destiny and a new name."

"An honored name," said Bentley, smiling; "it is almost a sacrifice to give it up. I never dreamed that you possessed such talent, Sarah."

"Oh, I began to write when the trouble came on my sister. It was by that means I supported her unhappy child; but it was in a small way, through papers and magazines. It was not till I was left alone that the blessing of hard work came upon me; but for that I must have died. In becoming an author I grew strong to suffer, and patient to wait."

"But your sister, poor thing! her's is a hard destiny; how will she hear of her son's death?" said Bentley.

A shade of sadness came over them all. Sarah Bentley's eyes filled with tears.

"It will not wound her," she said, in a voice low with gentle sadness; "my sister Hetty is dead."

* * * * * * * *

Before the October foliage lost any of its gorgeous richness, two weddings were celebrated in that double log cabin, and a right pleasant time the neighbors had on the occasion. Those who had seen Gillian doing the honors of her father's house in New York might have been a little surprised at the fashion of her marriage, and the guests that honored it. There was Judge Church, from The Bend, the blacksmith and his wife, Johnson, the constable, and many another great-hearted western man and woman, who had stood by Daniel Hart in his trouble, and believed in him thoroughly, spite of the falsehood that surrounded him. No man, woman, or child, who had given the good man a kind word in that time of trial was forgotten. For many a year after, those people told with pride of the splendid wedding they had attended in that double cabin, where the brides were dressed in white muslin like any of their daughters, though Mr. Bentley was worth his millions on millions, and might have paved the cabin floor with gold, if he had cared to do it.

This double marriage took place in the morning, and before noon all the inmates of the cabin were on their route to New York and Rockland county. Just as the party were about to leave the house, Mr. Bentley and Daniel Hart took the blacksmith on one side, and when they came among the guests again the good man held a broad

sheet of paper, with several seals attached, against the signatures of Daniel Hart and Mr. Bentley. It was a deed of the log cabin, and all the land that surrounded it.

* * * * * * * *

Again the fashionable world was in commotion. Such windfalls of gossip seldom are provided by one family in so short a time. Young Hurst, the claimant of Mr. Bentley's property, had died suddenly, and Mr. Bentley had come into possession again. His daughter Gillian was married to Mr. Woodworth, and cards of invitation were out for a grand wedding reception. More than all this, Mr. Bentley had been for some time privately married to his daughter's friend, Mrs. Ransom, the great authoress, who was now the acknowledged wife and mistress of his home. Then it was rumored that Martha Hart, the pretty cousin who had waltzed with such spirit on the night of the ball, was married to a young farmer in Rockland county, and had settled down on her father's old homestead.

All these rumors must be true; for, the world said, they came from a good source—an old colored woman who had been in the family for years—the woman with that gorgeous turban, who had insisted upon regulating the whole household on the night of the ball. Surely no one could forget her, or doubt that she knew all about it.

THE END

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